

**Forward Through History: A Critical Study of the Work of Chris Offutt**

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## List of Abbreviations

GB	<i>The Good Brother</i>
KS	<i>Kentucky Straight</i>
NH	<i>No Heroes: A Memoir of Coming Home</i>
OW	<i>Out of the Woods</i>
SR	<i>The Same River Twice: A Memoir</i>

*He wanted to change his pattern for awhile, get away from books, away from Kentucky, have an adventure off someplace he'd never been before. To set forth in his car and head west with no precise plan or destination was unlike anything Wilgus had ever done before, and the prospect of the journey had filled his mind ever since school was out.*

**Gurney Norman: *Kinfolks: The Wilgus Stories***

## Introduction

### **Forward Through History: Escaping the Tyranny of the Past In the Work of Chris Offutt**

In response to Temple Drake's dramatic announcement of the demise of her past in William Faulkner's 1951 novel, *Requiem for a Nun*, Gavin Stevens tells her that "the past is never dead. It's not even past" (85). These words have often been misappropriated as support for critical theorists searching for traditionalism in southern literature, those who insist that the gaze of the southern author is always cast upon an idealised historical moment. In his aptly-named 1998 text, *Inventing Southern Literature*, Michael Kreyling takes a further cue from Faulkner (although this time from *Intruder in the Dust*); he notes that "it is always a few minutes before two o'clock on July 3, 1863, and Pickett is always about to give the fateful order to charge: southern identity is always about to be achieved and obliterated in the same fateful instant" (168). The connection between southern literature and history is undeniably important, but the focus on history in this region's literature is both ubiquitous and potentially limiting. Faulkner's phrases have been manipulated to paralyse successions of writers; though they exist in the present, their membership in the southern tradition necessitates continual negotiation of their past. A more faithful interpretation of Gavin Stevens' statement recognises that it is not the rearward glance of those in the present that keeps the past alive; it is the past's intrusion into the present. The first interpretation assumes an active devotion to a collective history, while the second emphasises the inescapability of the past within a culture whose identity has been defined by dramatic historical moments. The history of the South informs its literature, and the stewards of that literature, particularly contemporary

writers, need not seek out a past when its influences are as pervasive as they are formative.

Ideas of historical consciousness in the study of southern literature, however, are in fact relatively recent in what is itself a young field of critical thought. The appropriately-titled New Criticism<sup>1</sup> movement (spanning approximately the 1940s to the 1970s in the South) “made history in effect a fallacy” -- that is, divorced the aesthetic significance of the text from the historical context from which it emanated (Kreyling, 34). Louis D. Rubin is credited with reintroducing history to literary criticism; as recently as 1984, he claimed that “literature may usefully be viewed in terms of its historical unfolding, its changing relationships to changing time and place ... [this notion] is not universally acknowledged in contemporary critical thought” (quoted in Kreyling, 33). Indeed, since Rubin’s comments in the early 1980s, contemporary southern literary theory has succeeded in its attempts to “subvert the tendency to think of aesthetic representation as ultimately autonomous, separable from its cultural context and hence divorced from the social, ideological, and material matrix in which all art is produced and consumed” (Greenblatt, 164). A contemplation of southern literature without a focus on its historical connotations is no doubt puzzling to the external reader: the South in the American imagination exists chiefly as an historical entity -- Faulkner once noted that “the South is a little behind the rest of the country” (quoted in Gray, 1986: 168). What may have been current for Robert Penn Warren, let us imagine, always appeared to the external reader to have been set in the past; that is, what is contemporary to the South has always functioned as a facet of American history. Lucille Odom, the precocious narrator of Josephine Humphreys’ *Rich in Love* (1987), declares that she “felt strongly that history was a category comprising not only famous men of bygone eras,

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<sup>1</sup> Twentieth-century New Critics of English and American literature advocated close reading of texts and the exclusion of material external to the primary source. In the South, the Agrarians (for instance, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, and Cleanth Brooks) were devotees of this movement, emphasising particularity over generality.



but *me, yesterday*” (47). This is perhaps the most persistent aspect of the mythology of the South -- that it exists as a sort of living history, a testament to the past in the present.

As much as contemporary southern literary theory is primarily concerned with contextualising its works within an historical paradigm, it must also combat the eschatological predictions of critics from the early 1970s. Sociologists during that period of intensive social and political upheaval in the South claimed that there was “every good reason to believe that to the extent that the daily occupational and educational environment of the Southerner becomes similar to that of the non-Southerner, the attitudes and values of the two will also become indistinguishable” (McKinney and Bourque, 399). Many southerners of the time could not foresee a halt to the onslaught of change that the South was experiencing, nor imagine that so much change could take place without the southern identity being drastically altered. Vann Woodward famously remarked that “in the race between the bulldozer and the magnolia tree, the bulldozer is clearly winning” (quoted in Core, xi). Southern identity, scholars feared, was dependent upon economic, structural, and societal systems for its definition -- and southern literature was consumed by the region’s identity. Southern identity, however, as obtuse and ambiguous a concept that it may be, is at once greater and less than the sum of its structural parts. Greater in the sense that its resilience, as of the first decade of the twenty-first century, is self-evident, and less in that it is rooted in conjecture and impression. “The South is not the North; Atlanta is not New York; but neither Atlanta nor the South is at all what it used to be,” writes Walter Sullivan (94). The South of the closing decades of the last century is indeed “not at all what it used to be,” but it remains distinctively the South all the same -- that is, “not New York.”

How can this be possible? How can the identity of a region eclipse the eradication of the very ideals upon which it rested? Simply, it has become apparent

that what the Agrarians<sup>2</sup> and the New Critics -- and indeed, Americans in general -- *thought* were the foundations of southern identity were not necessarily so. In their introduction to *The Oxford Book of the American South: Testimony, Memory, and Fiction* (1997), Edward Ayers and Bradley Mittendorf contend that “certain passions” are often illustrated in two centuries of southern literature: “the complexities of race, the fierceness and solace of religious faith, the absurdity and hilarity of everyday life, the temptations and consequences of violence, ... the distances that separate the rich from the poor, the ambivalence toward the outside world, and the tenaciousness of memory” (ix). Essentially, these passions demarcate a society fraught with racial tension, piety, parochialism, pugnacity, social stratification, exclusivism and overwhelming memorialisation -- hardly a complimentary portrait of southern identity. George Brown Tindall, however, notes that “we learn ... from the southern past and [from] the history of others that to change is not necessarily to disappear. And we learn from modern psychology that to change is not necessarily to lose one’s identity; to change, sometimes, is to find it” (quoted in Jim Wayne Miller, 92).<sup>3</sup> The change that the South experienced, then, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, resulted not in the loss of an actual southern identity, but in the exposure of the *fallacy* of southern identity.

A more authentic conceptualisation of the southern ethos is asserted by Lucinda MacKethan in her entry on southern writing for the *Encyclopedia of American Literature*; she unsurprisingly credits William Faulkner with introducing the themes that have proven to be the “enduring matter” of southern literature: “the past as burden, alive in the present; the human need to assert identity and to claim

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<sup>2</sup> The “Agrarians” refers to the Southern or Nashville Agrarians, a group of twelve southern writers who collectively wrote *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930), which criticised both modernism and industrialism and mourned the supposed loss of traditional southern culture.

<sup>3</sup> Tindall’s idea echoes the earlier work of Fredrik Barth, who emphasised the importance of boundaries in the retention of “groupness.” Within these boundaries, cultural markers can shift dramatically (religious sentiment, language, geography, etc.), but as long as boundaries remain, the group can put borders around its identity. For some groups, a simple psychological affiliation can be sufficient to maintain these boundaries, though obviously, group identity will be “stronger” if more, and more tangible, cultural markers remain.

greatness; man's responsibility to and for others; the inevitable clash between man's limitations and his vision; the bonds that the land, family, and place exert; and nature's mysterious, compelling hold over human endeavor" (999). Southern literature is no longer beholden to antiquated (and, arguably, wholly fictitious) notions of what constitutes a "southern" text; indeed, a contemporary southern novel that does not take as its focus the "mutual if inharmonious fate" of "black and white" southerners can hardly be accused of ignoring an integral component of southernness (Butler, 35). Such narrow parameters for a regional literature described, traditionally, as "homogeneous," have given way to a new, heterogeneous, southern ideal (Gray, 1996: 220). To move forward in this manner, however, necessitates an awareness of what has gone before; this newfound heterogeneity has been facilitated by an overwhelming rejection of homogeneity, and true appreciation of the former is impossible without acknowledgement of the latter. A regional literature that once favoured exclusively the works of white men of the privileged classes has been transformed into a genre that both accommodates and endorses writing by women, African Americans, immigrants of varying nationalities, and poor whites -- and the very best of this work credits (in some form or another) the triumph that their publication represents.

Chris Offutt "was born and raised on a ridge in Eastern Kentucky, in the middle of the Daniel Boone National Forest" (SR, 12). Though biographies generally mention the provenance of their subjects, Offutt's work centralises his home place -- because that place, Appalachia, informs every aspect of Offutt as a man, and as an artist. Offutt states in a 2002 interview with Gavin Grant that he no longer feels "compelled to identify myself strictly as a Kentuckian, or a Kentucky writer" -- indicating, of course, that he had once felt such a compulsion. His more recent publications (several short stories and an essay) reflect his recent ability to distance himself from his background, a progression that recollects as much as it predicts.

Offutt's future work may indeed illustrate his movement away from his geocultural heritage, but the achievement of this distance is the result of five volumes of carefully-weighed, cathartic explorations of Offutt's relationship with his home place. A similar exploration of this relationship was undertaken by James Alan McPherson, when asked to write the preface to Breece D'J Pancake's posthumously published collection of short stories. Pancake, whose work provided inspiration for Offutt's own, was a native West Virginian; his mother felt that McPherson's preface to her son's collection would be incomplete without careful consideration of the deceased writer's home region. McPherson traveled to Appalachia, and subsequently acknowledged in the preface that he "did not understand the focus of [Pancake's] life until [he] had driven through his home state, along those winding mountain roads, where at every turn one looks down at houses nestled in hollows. In those hollows, near those houses, there are abandoned cars and stoves and refrigerators" (11). The reader prepares for a stereotype-ridden commentary, decrying the slovenliness of the Appalachian people. Instead, McPherson sees these remnants as an ideological symbol of the region:

Nothing is thrown away by people in that region; some use is found for even the smallest evidence of affluence. And eyes, in that region, are trained to look either up or down: from the hollows up toward the sky or from the encircling hills down into the hollows. Horizontal vision, in that area, is rare. The sky there is circumscribed by insistent hillsides thrusting upward. It is an environment crafted by nature for the dreamer and for the resigned. (11)

This is the Appalachia of which Offutt writes -- a forgotten corner of America whose citizens are stymied by their topography, and who either live in deference to its dominance or with resentment for its hindrances. What Offutt does *not* include in his writing, though, are popular images of hillbillies and poor white trash. "The most outstanding fiction," writes James Hart, "has used precisely delineated local settings and situations to create a microcosm for the treatment of universal issues" (625):

Offutt depicts a culture with the same intrinsic concerns of any other -- family, loyalty, financial stability, et cetera -- set against an identifiably distinctive Appalachian backdrop of traditional honour and moral certitude. In this vein, Offutt has appointed himself an ambassador for the region, dedicated to the task of dispelling myths about Appalachia created in the nineteenth century by non-native writers. Offutt espouses the importance of self-representation that George Fitzhugh once claimed: "it is important that we should write our own books ... it matters little who makes our shoes" (279). Literature is a regional industry that cannot be manufactured externally, and Offutt's work is devoted to the construction of an accurate, native Appalachian mythology.

Although Offutt has been selected as one of the twenty best fiction writers in America, and although his work has received awards from such acclaimed sources as the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Academy of Arts and Letters, there is a distinct lack of critical review of this work. Matthew Guinn notes a similar shortage of criticism for such writers "as [Dorothy] Allison, [Larry] Brown, [Richard] Ford, and [Randall] Kenan," and attributes this "dearth" to a "break from tradition" (xi). Inasmuch as southern literature has expanded its boundaries to include a greater variety of writers that can be classed as "southern," southern literary criticism has proved particularly tentative in its integration of critical thought about such writers. The table of contents of recent numbers of the *Southern Literary Journal* reveals only a handful of articles about contemporary southern authors -- and a wealth of criticism, still, about William Faulkner and other Modernists. Similarly, the web page for the *Mississippi Quarterly* notes that "recent and regular topics for the journal include Kate Chopin, John and William Faulkner, Charles Frazier, Ellen Gilchrist, Lewis Nordan, Walker Percy, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Frederick Douglass, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, [and] Ellen Glasgow." Of course, the *Mississippi Quarterly* necessarily focuses on writers native to that state, but to

overlook Barry Hannah, Larry Brown, or Rick Bass at this point seems negligent, at best, and at worst, an admission that contemporary southern writers are not worthy of southern literary criticism. This is not to say that no important work remains to be done on the works of southern stalwarts, merely that there seems to exist a (largely wasted) opportunity for critics to contribute something original to a field that has been in a state of flux for more than thirty years.

The *form* of such criticism, however, needs to account for its antecedents, taking into consideration both the “aesthetic formalism” of New Criticism and the historical matrices in which contemporary southern literature is set (Guinn, xiii). If the first wave of southern literary criticism emphasised the technical and autonomous aspects of a text, and more recent work has focused on interpolation of specifically southern ideals into a broader cultural context, then a more inclusive, more thorough southern literary criticism of the future will examine the manner in which artists use technical skill to situate their work within an historical or political moment. In his essay for Jefferson Humphries’ 1996 collection, *The Future of Southern Letters*, Jack Butler declares that “an old fact that survives into a new context is a new fact. It can’t be dismissed as irrelevant, it must not be handled as cliché” (36). Let us consider the “old fact” to be that imaginary entity known as “southern identity,” and let us further allow that the “new context” is the South after the early 1970s, replete with women in business suits, Wal-Marts in every town, miles of blacktop highway, and wireless internet in impersonal Barnes & Noble box stores. That “old fact”-- that is, southern identity -- has indeed “survived” its challenges, and remains a palpable, directive force. The “new fact” of southern identity is in fact *more* relevant today than in the past, simply because it has been challenged but not conquered. The very best of contemporary southern literature – and indeed, all southern writing -- embraces this idea of tested fidelity, and focuses more on the difficulties of relationships rather than upon the blind faith of the past. George Garrett writes that

“to do their work, Faulkner and Welty and Warner and Foote and Settle and all the rest had to love the place. Deeply.” He goes on to note that he doubts seriously that “we will again see that kind of love shining through American writing, not exactly in the same form, anyway. We will live to see something else, something different, maybe even some things wonderful, but never that true, unconditional love again” (420). Jack Butler corroborates Garrett’s claim; he writes:

Before, a writer was measured by the fidelity of his rendering, Now she is measured by her ability to accumulate real-world details. There is a difference. The first is a gestural technique, instinct with movement. The second is additive. What is gained is perhaps a sort of freshness and vividness in the portrait. What is lost, perhaps the hardest loss of all, is resonance. (38)

The “deep love” that imbued the work of Faulkner and Welty -- the resonance of which Butler writes -- conjures images of a southern ethos closely guarded by its sentinels against the omnipresent threat of disbandment. Garrett’s elegiac prediction assumes that resonance, or deep love, cannot emanate from contemporary literature that concerns itself with the accumulation of “real-world details,” but both he and Butler are too hasty in their dismissal of this new form. Is blind, untested, faithful love inherently more valuable (as Garrett and Butler suggest) than a more subtle, yet well-reasoned and persistent love? Surely not -- surely the contemporary writers’ negotiation of their own relationship with the South, and their enduring fealty to that place while fully cognisant of its faults, is a more meaningful expression of love than its historical counterpart.

Again in his essay for *The Future of Southern Letters* -- called “Still Southern after All These Years” -- Jack Butler poses a set of rhetorical questions about the nature of “southern” writing. He emphasises, too, that the insularity of traditional southern literature has given way to plurality, and concludes his remarks by whimsically attempting to distribute contemporary southern writers into four categories: “conservators, updaters, deniers, and futurists” (38). “Conservators,” he

notes, “want to hold onto the old resonance, the old clarity;” “updaters ... move us visibly forward from the old recognizable patterns into newer generations ... trying to show the almost genetic continuance of the tradition.” Butler identifies Richard Ford as “our great denier ... [who] has been steadily purifying himself away from influences ... You get the feeling that he doesn’t believe there is any such thing as a southern writer.” Finally, Butler’s fourth category is reserved for the futurists, who “live for style, for the scintillating edge of what a sentence can do ... [they make] certain that the instrument of perception always stays bright and clean” (39). If, as Butler insinuates, these four categories represent the present and the future of southern letters, then Chris Offutt is the quintessence of that future; he does not confine himself to a single category but rather combines elements of all four to produce a new southern literature. His work, undeniably southern in both pedigree and subject matter, is not merely part of the temporally pluralistic genre; it is internally diverse. The content of Offutt’s work substantiates his personal and literary devotion to traditional elements: his role as a “conservator” is most evident in passages describing his forays into the woods, or his conversations with his childhood friends that rely heavily on rural dialect and masculine inflection. Offutt’s “update” transforms his Kentucky family history into a collective to include the histories of his non-southern in-laws; he applies the traditional southern devotion to family and history to another family, another history. Chris Offutt does not deny his southern-ness nor his Appalachian-ness; his fidelity to his provenance is conspicuous and emphatic. What he does deny, however, is the idea that southern identity is strongest among those who have never experienced another culture; identity, he argues, is most powerful when it is chosen, not imposed. However, choosing is always problematic and the old magnets of place and culture make the choice all the more difficult. Offutt’s forays away from a Kentucky setting, unlike Ford’s, still feature Kentuckian characters, many of whom are restless to return home. As such,



there are few of Ford's efforts to "steadily purify" himself of southern influences; more, there is the notion that his influences are not purely southern but also carry tones of other regions (most frequently, the west). Offutt is not denying his regional identification, merely the insularity of allowing himself to be influenced by only one place. Lastly, Offutt is not simply a macro-futurist, in that his writing encompasses most components of this new southern literature. He is also a micro-futurist, for just as Butler stresses Barry Hannah's futuristic tendencies, or Lewis Nordan's surrealistic elements, so Chris Offutt too is a consummately style-conscious writer.<sup>4</sup> His minimalist prose is carefully simple, pointedly deceiving the reader towards an impression of austerity that matches his Kentucky settings and characters. What is most thoughtfully considered, though, is what remains unwritten. In masculine prose purposely lacking sentiment, emotion is conveyed through the author's unwillingness to display his vulnerabilities.

It is important to interpret Chris Offutt's work through the medium of Jack Butler's essay, as it both situates the author within his generation of southern writers, and also identifies him as a writer continually on the cusp; as such, he is the manifestation of "southern-ness." John Lowe's introduction to *The Future of Southern Letters* summarises Jefferson Humphries' discussion of southern identity by asserting that "any regional or national identity stems from at least two conflicting needs -- the desire to create a narrative from within that codifies identity but also by the narrative constructed *without* that the first narrative inevitably responds to" (12). This question -- of proving one's identity by testing it against another's -- has plagued southern history since the Civil War and the region's displacement as the national darling.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say, however, that there are no other hallmarks of

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<sup>4</sup> Though Butler does not mention her specifically, and while her tone is not masculine in the manner of Hannah, Nordan, or Offutt, Bobbie Ann Mason is another southern writer whose prose style is remarkable for its minimalism.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this notion of defining marginalised groups' identity against that of the mainstream is hardly unique to the South, though it may have been felt more strongly there as a result of its frequent and dramatic confrontations with the rest of America. The phenomenon of positioning a smaller group in opposition to a more established larger one has been similarly experienced in Canada, Scotland,

southern identity, just that the independence of the South is something of a misnomer: the South's persistent pursuance of its own (nationally unpopular) cultural systems precipitate continual comparisons with the larger nation. There can be little doubt that the South functions as the "Other" to the rest of the United States, but Kentuckian Rodger Cunningham extends the social metaphor one step further, to exclude Appalachia from the rest of the South. He writes that "Appalachia exists in a blank created by a double otherness -- a *doubly* double otherness ... the region is not only an internal Other to the South as the South is the internal Other of America" (45).

Chris Offutt -- as a southerner and as a Kentuckian -- is part of this "doubly double otherness:" culturally, he claims membership in a community twice excluded from the dominant culture of mainstream America. Personally, though, he also feels excluded -- from a home in which his parents demanded total silence, as a "smart kid" in an educationally remedial region, and as one of the few Appalachians who dared travel beyond state lines. Humphries' assertion that one identity is formed in relation to another, external one is certainly applicable to Offutt, who has spent much of his life defining himself negatively -- that is, by what he is not. He is not an average Kentuckian, or a regular American, or a prototypical memoirist, or even a conventionally southern writer. Ironically, these exclusions are exactly what solidify his southern identity: he is the human representation of Otherness, and his writing -- both fiction and non-fiction -- exemplifies the continual disappointment of a peripheral existence.

Matthew Guinn contends that for contemporary southern writers to "cling to the methods of their forebears would only result in southern fiction's being relegated to a collateral, and subsidiary, position in a dynamic American literature" (184). His words, of course, recall Eudora Welty's famous incitement, revealed during a 1957 lecture in Cambridge. She declared that "for the artist to be unwilling to move,

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Wales, and many other 'peripheral' regions.

mentally or spiritually or physically, out of the familiar is a sign that spiritual timidity or poverty or decay have come upon him; for what is familiar will then have turned into all that is tyrannical” (“Place in Fiction”). Though Welty spoke a generation before Guinn, her words have as much salience for the future of contemporary southern literature as they did for earlier writers. Southern literature cannot grow unless its authors are indeed willing to move out of the familiar, and are not “afraid to tackle the big subject, take the big chance” (Hobson, 86). Equally, southern literature cannot progress unless its critics accommodate and integrate such pioneering work. It is certainly challenging to attempt to locate innovation within a canon that is steeped in tradition; this thesis reflects that challenge and attempts to offer a practical solution.

A short review of Offutt’s *Out of the Woods* in the March, 1999, number of the online magazine *Weekly Wire* succinctly illustrates the distance between contemporary authors and their critics. Stephen Ausherman writes that “Offutt reinforces the notion that hillbillies aren’t fit for life in our America” (March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1999). While Ausherman’s publication is hardly scholarly, his ridiculous statement exemplifies the danger of interpreting contemporary southern writing through traditional paradigms. No doubt Ausherman belongs to the same school of thought as Edward Ayers and Bradley Mittendorf; he read Offutt and found “the temptations and consequences of violence,” and “the absurdity and hilarity of everyday life” (ix). To read Offutt in the expectation of finding an “old fact,” however, is to cause as much damage to southern literature as creative timidity doubtlessly will. Instead, we must consider Offutt to be the purveyor of new facts in a new context -- still southern, still cognisant of the old facts, but devoted to moving his work away from the figurative and literal boundaries of the past.

In keeping with the new ethos of southern literature -- and inasmuch as an appreciation of previous successful, traditional, doctoral theses informed my own decisions about the composition of this dissertation -- I thought it best to restructure the format of this thesis to more accurately reflect recent changes in literary and critical thought. Chris Offutt is a difficult author precisely because he resists categorisation -- at least, in the categories that already exist within southern literary criticism. In order to provide a full assessment of Offutt's work, I felt it necessary to consider each of his books primarily as its own independent volume, and interpret it through the critical paradigm that best lends itself to that book's main ideas. Instead of including one, lengthy review of all critical literature that could help illuminate Offutt's texts, I chose instead to identify a new "category" for each of these books and provide five specific discussions of the salient criticism. Additionally, each of Offutt's five books has its own chapter, organised around what I argue are its central themes. Each chapter that is devoted to one of Offutt's five books, therefore, has an accompanying theoretical chapter -- a review of the critical literature specifically tailored to that work's fundamental issues. The resulting thesis is thus comprised of five pairs of chapters; within each pair, the first chapter examines the critical context of the appropriate literary category, and the second emphasises Offutt's contribution to or evolution from that specific paradigm. Structuring the thesis in this manner provides an immediacy to the reader, an opportunity to remain continually engaged with the current argument. However, subdividing Offutt's work into these five categories does not negate the need for a more unifying theme. This format also allows for a more careful consideration of the particular ways in which Offutt contributes and responds to the ever-changing field of southern literature.

*Kentucky Straight* (1992) is Offutt's first collection of stories, and reflects the author's disavowal of stereotypical perceptions of Appalachia as it explores the region's insularity and ingrained codes of honour. Its framing chapter thus discusses

the history of Appalachian literature and the rigidity and falsity of the region's role in the imagination of other Americans. This section will discuss the nature of stereotyping in general, and demonstrate the overwhelming challenges Appalachian writers face in the eradication of the region's unflattering mythology. Offutt's physical journey in his first memoir, *The Same River Twice* (1993), becomes a metaphorical search for a method of ensuring his personal legacy; he travels the country in quest of an appropriate artistic medium through which he can construct an enduring personal history. Consequently, its accompanying theoretical chapter examines the evolution of the autobiographical genre in American literature, and the contemporary obsession with "the truth." These chapters will dissect the autobiographical impulse and reveal the degree of artistic contrivance in the creation of such work; equally, this discussion will negotiate the difficult territories of fact and fiction. Offutt's only novel, *The Good Brother* (1997), places an Appalachian man in Montana, trying to create a new identity while mourning the loss of his past; its companion chapter focuses on the southern, masculine impulse to go West, and the enduring mythology of that region. This section will examine the South's kinship with the West as two American regions widely mythologised in the national imagination, and the dangers inherent in blind obeisance of these myths. *Out of the Woods* (1999), Offutt's second volume of short stories, situates native Kentuckians in various other American locales, and chronicles their figurative return to Appalachia; its accompanying chapter ponders the ramifications of deracination and the southern mythology of place. These chapters will consider the psychological difficulties inherent in both remaining in place and in attempting to leave home. Finally, Offutt's second memoir, *No Heroes: A Memoir of Coming Home* (2002), details the author's return to Kentucky, interspersed with anecdotes of his parents-in-law's experiences in the death camps of World War II; the remaining theoretical chapter questions Offutt's representation of these stories by examining notions of cultural

appropriation in contemporary fiction, as well as the literature of the Holocaust.

After close examination of these five distinctive ideas, then, the overall assessment of Offutt's work will emphasise his important role in the literature of the new South, which is dynamic, innovative, and compelling.

## Chapter 1

### Appalachian Literature and the Peculiar Burden of Stereotyping

In an essay published posthumously, Flannery O'Connor wrote that

Southern identity is not really connected with mockingbirds and beaten biscuits and white columns any more than it is with hookworm and bare feet and muddy clay roads ... An identity is not to be found on the surface; ... it is not something that *can* become a cliché ... It is not made from what passes, but from those qualities that endure, regardless of what passes, because they are related to truth. ("The Regional Writer," 57-58)

O'Connor's conception of the South, if applied to Appalachia, introduces the two main elements of the study of this region and its literature, which are as abstract as they are crucial. O'Connor negates the influence of stereotyping (or cliché) by denying the possibility of its existence (for identity, at least), and then poses "cliché" in a negative relation to "truth." Such an assertion, while inspirational, neglects to consider the alternative: stereotype may be more rooted in truth than scholars would like to believe,<sup>6</sup> and it is precisely the joining together of these concepts that has formed the basis of all Appalachian literature and subsequent literary study.

Appalachian literature -- and the region itself -- has been troubled since its inception; indeed, the notion of Appalachia as a man-made construct is at the epicentre of its maladies. As a disparate region of the South, Appalachia did not receive national recognition until the final two decades of the nineteenth century. Prior to that time, no real distinction was made between 'Appalachia' and the 'South.' A variety of social and economic factors contributed to the ultimate separation of these culturally-defined geographic areas (several of which will be

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<sup>6</sup> This is what scholars (particularly, Otto Klineberg) have referred to as the "Kernel of Truth" hypothesis, which underpins many stereotypes. Klineberg's hypothesis will be discussed in more detail further on in this chapter.

discussed in this chapter), but the roots of contemporary Appalachia's cultural identity find germination in its identification as a subregion of the United States South. In his 1996 contribution to *The Future of Southern Letters*, a comprehensive text predicting the critical direction of a previously-unilateral literary genre (and as noted in the introduction), Appalachian scholar Rodger Cunningham outlines his theory of the region's relationship with both the South and with the rest of America. A self-proclaimed seventh-generation Appalachian and member of the faculty at Alice Lloyd College in Pippa Passes, Kentucky, Cunningham claims that "Appalachia exists in a blank created by a double otherness -- a *doubly* double otherness ... the region is not only an internal Other to the South [but] the South is the internal Other of America" (45). Cunningham's concept of Appalachia as a "double Other" intellectualises what has been apparent for more than a century: Appalachia, more than any other region, occupies a separate sphere in the American psyche, wholly isolated and imaginatively consigned to the fringes of a national identity.

For the purposes of this thesis, the roots of this dissemination will be largely overlooked, in favour of a more detailed inspection of the cultural and literary expressions of this region's history of exclusion and its chequered reputation. In his 1997 exploration of the origins of Appalachian stereotypes, David Hsiung begins by outlining some of the most popular examples: Appalachia is a land of "feuds, individualism, moonshine, subsistence farming, quilting bees, illiteracy, [and] duelling banjos" (1), although others claim that "Appalachia is finally outgrowing its image of shacks and bare feet" (Jones, 2000). Hsiung's book is largely devoted to disseminating the concept of isolation in relation to the formation of Appalachian stereotypes, while other scholars have offered either genetic or economic causations of Appalachian difference. Harry Caudill's exploration of coal mining in Appalachia, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* (1962), seemed to provide concrete sociological



evidence that twentieth-century Appalachians derived from a “parent stock” of “illiterate ancestors” who were exiled European criminals, “simple people lacking complexity in emotional or mental makeup” (10, 31, 39). Caudill’s tone of supposed pride for these “Stone Age savage[s]” lent authenticity to this text, widely considered to be the most influential contemplation of this “depressed” region’s future (31). *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, though, is at its core a book about the perils of strip mining; Caudill’s was a vocal indictment of those outsiders who would sacrifice Appalachia’s natural environment in the quest of financial gain. His consideration of Appalachian ancestry is thus peripheral to the focus on mining, and Caudill only uses his discussion of Appalachian history as a means of introducing his more technical argument.

Ironically, a more sympathetic voice of the Appalachian people belongs to Henry D. Shapiro; unlike Caudill (of Whitesburgh, Kentucky), Shapiro was a native New Yorker. However, Shapiro’s *Appalachia on Our Mind* (1978), conceived as “the history of the idea of ... and hence of the invention of Appalachia,” theorised that the reputation of Appalachia (and Appalachians) was not a cultural certainty but an exaggerated conceptualisation of a diverse (though distinctive) regional group (1978, ix). In a posthumously published essay appearing in John Lowe’s *Bridging Southern Cultures: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (2005), Shapiro suggests that the impression of Appalachian people upon the American imagination was not a result of external influence, but a misappropriation of internal bias. He contends that members of the Appalachian upper class maintained a negative opinion of the lower classes (in keeping with Hsiung’s list of stereotypes), and when coal mining brought Appalachia into the American consciousness, this image became extended to *all* Appalachian people -- not just the economically disadvantaged (2005: 286). Debate over the origins of Appalachian stereotyping, however, seems at this point to be counterproductive. Indeed, Shapiro notes in his earlier work that “we can waste our

time arguing with the past, asserting that its version of reality was incorrect, that Appalachia was not a strange land nor the mountaineers a peculiar people.” But he goes on to write that “if the past can’t answer, neither does it care” (1978: xvii-xviii). What is apparent is that there exists, in the wider America, an opinion of this region and its people that marginalises, infantilises, and at times demonises the entire culture. Much of contemporary Appalachian literature is now determined to act as a defense against the century-long tyranny of misconception, and its most staunch defenders must always be native Appalachians. This chapter, and the ensuing discussion of Chris Offutt’s first collection of short stories, *Kentucky Straight*, will argue that -- in line with Shapiro’s vision of Appalachia as an “invented culture” -- the reception of Appalachian literature is largely determined by authors’ pedigrees, as well as their fealty to the murky concepts of truth and cultural responsibility.

The literary manifestation of authorial legitimacy stems from the very text that introduced the “idea” of Appalachia to a national audience. Indeed, the full title of David Hsiung’s critical examination of Appalachian stereotypes is *Two Worlds in the Tennessee Mountains: Exploring the Origins of Appalachian Stereotypes*. This is an obvious response to an 1884 work by Mary Noailles Murfree entitled *In the Tennessee Mountains* -- the first book of its kind to attract a national audience. Mary Noailles Murfree’s work encapsulates the debate surrounding Appalachian literature. This short story collection was “based on her recollections of the stories she overheard on hotel verandas during girlhood summers at Beersheba Springs immediately after the Civil War” (Shapiro, 2005: 274). What is insinuated here by Shapiro, as he carefully notes that her stories were “overheard,” is that while Murfree may have been a Tennessean, she was no Appalachian. The singularity of her vision of the Appalachian people betrayed an unwillingness to divorce the individual from the collective, and more importantly, an unwillingness to investigate if such a

separation even existed.<sup>7</sup> Hsiung's title captures the opinion shared by many of today's Appalachian scholars: Appalachia is not one world, one region populated by exact replicas of the "Stone Age savage." Shapiro preceded his subtle rebuke of Murfree's work by noting that "well into the twentieth century, home missionaries prepared for the field by reading ... *In the Tennessee Mountains*" (2005: 274); the danger, of course, lies in the presentation of fiction as fact, in an external audience receiving fictions about the region without benefit of the proverbial 'grain of salt.' Shapiro is referring here to the late nineteenth-century movement that had as its goal the introduction of religion to this supposedly secular, "unchurched" American region. Before the 1870s, Shapiro notes in *Appalachia on Our Mind*, there were many such unsettled regions, and Appalachia did not seem more wild than these others.

After this period, though, civilisation had reached most other such regions, and Appalachia's resistance to this progress (first attributed to its remote location) made it, simply, a curiosity for "local colour writers" and home missionaries. Outsiders had assumed that Appalachian "peculiarities" would recede as "civilisation" came to the mountains, but local colourists and home missionaries had a vested interest in protecting such peculiarities. Shapiro claims that "the validity of their efforts depended upon public acceptance of assertions that Appalachia was indeed a strange land inhabited by a peculiar people, a discrete region, in but not of America" (Shapiro, 1978: xiv). Thus, the only outsiders making forays into the hinterland were best rewarded when they furthered the opinion that Appalachians were cultural oddities. As long as Appalachia was imagined as an alien region, missionaries and writers would have legitimate purpose in either offering their help or their descriptive insights. The home missionaries' journey towards the spiritual enlightenment of the Appalachian people has been succeeded by such organisations

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<sup>7</sup> This, of course, remains the primary concern of most social psychologists -- the tension between the individual and the collective.

as VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) and the Tennessee Valley Authority; both are foundations predicated on the idea of other Americans helping those seen to be needy. This notion is at the heart of any discussion of Appalachia, and is yet another contributing factor to the region's "otherness": Americans have decided that "they" (Appalachians) need "our" help. The mere presence of an organisation such as VISTA tends to "other" Appalachia, as it devalues the inarguable differences among American regions. By offering external support to Appalachians, outsiders are not only implying that such support is necessary (whether it is wanted is another argument altogether) but that a culture that needs assistance is also inferior to the culture offering that help. America's relationship with Appalachia is not founded on "different, but equal" principles; it presupposes the superiority of the dominant culture, and the intrinsic inferiority of Appalachian culture.

A phrase often repeated in Shapiro's introduction to *Appalachia on Our Mind*, "a strange land and peculiar people," emanates from an 1873 essay of the same name, published in Lippincott's Magazine by Will Wallace Harney. Oddly, however, the focus of this essay was neither the particular strangeness of Appalachia nor its people, but its title continues to resonate as the summation of America's opinions regarding Appalachia. Ostensibly, this was the first "discovery" of Appalachia, for Harney and Lippincott "were the first to assert ... 'otherness'" (Shapiro, 1978, 4). Rodger Cunningham's proposal of a double otherness, some hundred and twenty years after the origination of the term's application to this region, confirms that Appalachia has not made any considerable gains towards "civilisation" or the discarding of its "peculiarities" in that time. Indeed, Appalachia seems frozen (factually or imaginatively) as a region that is geographically, culturally and temporally remote. William Faulkner's assertion that the South was "a little behind" the rest of the country assumes even greater significance when considering

Appalachia's "otherness" to the South.<sup>8</sup> Cunningham's intent, no doubt, was to demonstrate that although Appalachia shares enough similarities with the imagery of the South to be aligned with that independent region, its differentiation lies in the supposed amplification of the South's worst qualities, and the discarding of its best. The implied cultural retardation of the South (à la Faulkner), fears Cunningham, is the eminence of a purposefully stagnating Appalachian culture.

The pervasive sociological influence of Will Wallace Harney and Mary Noailles Murfree's conceptions of the Appalachian people invites an examination of the nature of stereotyping. The term "stereotype" has itself been stereotyped, in that its original meaning has been co-opted and adapted so that its commonly accepted definition is now the one to which it is most frequently applied. "Stereotypes" can be positive or negative; they are simply a means by which we can interpret our environment in an efficient manner. As Lee Jussim, Clark McCauley, and Yueh-Ting Lee argue in their 2001 article,

to stereotype is to generalize. To simplify the world, we generalize all the time: the British are reserved; Italians are outgoing; professors are absentminded ... such generalizations can have a germ of truth ... An accurate stereotype may even be desirable ... A problem with stereotypes arises when they are overgeneralized or just plain wrong. (336-337)

In relation to a discussion of Appalachia two facets of stereotyping become vital: Otto Klineberg's "Kernel of Truth" hypothesis, and both the primacy and recency effects. Studying race relations in 1950, Klineberg theorised that stereotypes are not fictions conjured by ill-meaning outsiders; rather, stereotypes emanate from some piece of factual information: the kernel of truth. That information, though, on its

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<sup>8</sup> Stephanie Foote, in her essay "The Cultural Work of American Regionalism" (in Charles L. Crow's *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America* (2003)), notes that "regional writing's focus on places that were geographically remote tends to translate into an understanding of those regions as *temporally* remote, too" (27). All three factors of remoteness -- geography, culture, and time -- thus combine to ensure that regional literature is engaged in a perpetual cycle of isolation and inferiority to mainstream society.

journey towards becoming a stereotype, becomes exaggerated or dramatised into general assignations.<sup>9</sup> Appalachians who do not self-identify with any components of David Hsiung's list of cultural phenomena (feuding, moonshine, illiteracy, duelling banjos, etc.) would still be (though possibly loathe to admit it) able to identify other Appalachians who embody such stereotypes. Empirical data substantiates Appalachia's high rates of poverty and illiteracy without relying on stereotyping, even as Harney and Murfree based their opinions on less concrete cultural factors.

Further, studies of memory have identified what is termed the "serial position effect," wherein a piece of information's position in a list can determine how effectively it is remembered. Both the primacy and recency effects are cognitive biases; the first refers to the disproportionate salience of *initial* stimuli, while the second indicates the salience of *recent* stimuli. In considering the "history of the idea of Appalachia," (to borrow Shapiro's terminology), the primacy effect seems to take precedence over the recency effect; that is, the information that Americans *first* received about this strange and peculiar region called Appalachia is the information that is considered most "true." The primacy effect is especially pertinent to discussions of stereotyping, when considering the difficulty of reversing an already-formed opinion. In this vein, altering the image of Appalachia in the American psyche seems all but impossible; perhaps if scholars, authors, artists, filmmakers, and politicians all made concerted efforts to provide the American public with non-stereotypical images of Appalachia, there might be a small chance of the recency effect taking hold. However, *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region* (1999), a book formulated as a response to Robert Schenkkan's

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<sup>9</sup> Such statements may seem out of place in a thesis devoted to the study of literature; however, I am inclined to agree with Gerard Graff, who wrote that "it is not specialization itself that occasions problems so much as the failure to bring specializations in relation with one another in any planned way. Specialization becomes self-enclosure only when there is no institutionalized correlation of specialties -- which means not only no integration but not even any conflict of specialties" (65-67). Isolation of literary theory has no place in a discussion, especially, of regional literature -- which is by definition part of a larger spectrum of theoretical concepts.

stereotype-ridden play, “The Kentucky Cycle” (1992), provides so many examples of Appalachian stereotypes in American culture that their eradication seems unlikely.

The consensus of the editors of *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes* (Dwight Billings, Gurney Norman and Katherine Ledford) is that Appalachians are the last American group that it is acceptable to ridicule. The politically-correct American consciousness now finds mimicry of other races and genders offensive, while it remains continually amused by the propagation of stereotypical (and negative) images of Appalachia. Billings *et al.* note that “mountain people ... are acceptable targets for hostility, projection, disparagement, scapegoat, and contempt” (3), and Chris Offutt wrote in 1998: “I don’t like the term “hillbilly” much. It’s an epithet that the culturally enlightened use. It’s acceptable to them. So is “redneck.” So is “cracker.” You hear people use those words. You see them in the press. But to me they’re mean words” (Palmer, 24). However, those Appalachians (like Offutt) who find the national representation of their region untruthful or even offensive, and who wish to correct that representation, meet with an indomitable reality: Americans delight in the quaintness of this “foreign” domestic culture, and display no willingness to relinquish their vision of this strange land and peculiar people.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, as the editors of *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes* argue, it is not just other Americans who are responsible for the transmission of entertaining half-truths: “many Appalachians themselves,” they contend, “are not immune to the use of stereotypes, especially when they promise to be profitable” (5). They cite the annual Hillbilly Days festival held in Pikeville, Kentucky -- which is an actual, organised (and lucrative) celebration of the stereotypes that other Appalachians seem to hate so much. One important question then becomes: if Appalachia is not defined by its stereotypes, then what are the markers of its regional identity? If it cannot be

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<sup>10</sup> Dorothy Allison’s *Trash* (1988), however, and Janisse Ray’s *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999) have attempted to reappropriate the terms “trash” and “cracker.” These authors’ self-identification with such monikers enacts a semantic shift, lessening the negative impact of such phrasing.

differentiated from the rest of the South by stereotypical oddities, can it remain -- quite simply -- interesting? Henry Shapiro has a few of his own rhetorical questions, although his deal more with the concrete: "If Appalachia were just like America," he writes, "where [is] the subject for their prose, where would be the interest of the piece, who would print it, who would buy it, who would read it?" (2005: 269). The answer, for Appalachian writers and scholars alike, is one they most fear: if Appalachia were just like America, there would be no audience and thus no industry. In Appalachia, as in all regions, the cachet is the individuality of the place -- which is not to say, of course, that Appalachia's writers are mercenaries, merely that they are not naïve enough to ignore the innate stories contained within this fascinating backdrop. Just as the missionaries and colourists derived their livelihood from the presupposition that Appalachia was fascinatingly different, today's proponents of Appalachian literature are not unaware of the marriage between cultural oddity and attentive readership.

Another of Gurney Norman's theoretical texts (whose own fictional work has played a vital role in the definition of a separate Appalachian literature), *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature* (2005), is a collection of critical essays contemplating some of the region's most influential authors. In the introduction to this work, the language employed by its authors points out the two most important issues arising in any discussion of Appalachian literature. They contend that "regional writing is *truthful* writing *from* and *of* the region, not merely about it" (Miller, Hatfield, and Norman, xv, italics mine). The first issue is one of pedigree: more than one hundred years of writing about Appalachia have produced an association between group belonging and authoritative literature. Miller, Hatfield and Norman, among others, maintain that any writing about Appalachia, in order to be credible, must be the effort of a native Appalachian. The powerful influence of



Murfree's 1884 *In the Tennessee Mountains*, stitched together from eavesdropping sessions on the porch of a luxurious summer resort, demonstrates the popularity of literature *about* Appalachia. Contemporary scholars, though, would insist that authentic literature of this region must not be a staged production but a natural expression of a native's experiences in their home. "Truth," then, as the editors of *An American Vein* describe it, is the natural summation of legitimate inclusion in this region -- its culture, its history, and its identity. The quality of Appalachian literature is primarily judged on the basis of authenticity: first, authors must be able to substantiate their membership in this particular cultural club, and withstand scrutiny of their fealty to the Appalachian region. Only then will the merit of their writing be considered, once the narrative voice has been deemed "truthful."

The dangers inherent in this sort of critical process are manifold, but perhaps the most urgent can be addressed within the framework of regional literature. "Regionalism," in the contemporary sense, can be understood to be a response to "Americanized mass culture ... we are retreating from the shopping mall culture that is pervading America and trying desperately to cling to vestiges of tradition" (Crow, 4). In *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America* (2003), Charles L. Crow maintains that the homogeneity of today's America provokes a desire to return to a time when disparate American regions retained their individual identities. And, since the geographical remoteness of Appalachia often blends with notions of temporal remoteness, the American public seeks a different *time* by searching out a different *place*.<sup>11</sup> When Murfree's book first appeared in 1884, it was received as a contemporary piece of literature. In reality, Murfree's stories were all set in the years preceding the Civil War, but external readers of Appalachian literature have traditionally insisted upon referencing the region not only as a different place, but as existing in a different time. The reason for such an insistence integrates notions of

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<sup>11</sup> Further discussion of the temporal/geographical intersection in contemporary literature will form part of Chapter 5, investigating the southerner's urge to head West.

comfort with those of distance. Lori Robison, in her essay about region and race, contends that “Appalachia was made safe through representations that emphasized distance, both distant borders and a distant past” (63). An Appalachia that exists in both a geographically and temporally remote sphere poses little threat to either mainstream America or, more vitally, to the American idealisation of this region’s stereotyped identity. What is lost in distance is gained in the preservation of an ideal.

However, to refer to southern or Appalachian or western literature as “regional writing” ideologically amputates it from mainstream “American” literature, creating a theoretical chasm as substantial as the physical distance between these largely rural regions and the more urban centres of commerce and culture. While regional literature is of interest *because* of its peculiarities, its classification as “regional” places it on the periphery. The term “regional writing” creates both a linguistic and actual distance between regional and central literature. “Regional” as an adjective is not merely a qualifier; it also acts as a *disqualifier*. “Regional writing” cannot semantically stand independently as “writing;” therefore its linguistic terminology creates an evaluative imbalance. Evidently, any writing classified as “regional” is prized first for its curiosities, next for its political message, and thirdly for its quality.

All writing, then, to emerge from Appalachia today is necessarily conscious of the difficult narrative of its history. This notion aligns it with definitive twentieth-century southern literature, the hallmarks of which are the concentration of the past in the present and the perpetuation of a regional mythology. The South “has been understood to be hotter, more exotic, more mythic, more romantic, more unified, more anachronistic, and more brutal than the rest of the country” (Robison, 58). Each of these adjectives can also be applied to Appalachia, although if the South is “more” exotic or “more” mythic than the rest of America, then Appalachia is certainly more exotic and more mythic than the South. The ambiguity of this lexical differentiation,

however, supports Cunningham's ideas of Appalachia's doubly double otherness: as a sub-region of the South, Appalachia's amplified differences make it twice removed from the American centre.

The dilemma facing all regional writers -- and especially those from Appalachia -- is this: does one write "truthfully" about the home region (and thus run the risk of losing marketable peculiarity), or does one choose to perpetuate the stereotypes of Appalachia, thereby garnering the fidelity of the niche market, but risk losing the sympathies of one's kinfolk? An Appalachian writer, it seems, can be "stereotypical" (satisfying a national readership) or "truthful" (satisfying a regional one), but not both. In his discussion of American writing, however, James Hart notes that "the most outstanding fiction ... has used precisely delineated local settings and situations to create a microcosm for the treatment of universal issues" (625).<sup>12</sup> If it is fair to say that in general terms, the best writing emerges from a successful admixture of regional particularities and broader themes, then how can Appalachian writers (stymied by the stereotype/truth dichotomy) produce anything of merit? The usage of stereotypes threatens the removal of one's legitimacy as an Appalachian writer to insiders, but enhances popularity in the broader American spectrum. Stephanie Foote, in her essay "The Cultural Work of American Regionalism," argues that Americans expect regional writing to contain a "formulaic" and "delicious kind of nostalgia" (28). The national audience is unwilling to accept a form of Appalachian literature that Appalachians themselves would consider "truthful." Instead, Americans are voluntarily engaged with an imaginative conceptualisation of a stereotyped region. Psychologically, Americans are obvious devotees of the primacy effect; the relative lack of success that "truthful" Appalachian writing achieves indicates an aversion (at least on commercial grounds) to adopting an alternate concept of the final distinctive American region.

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<sup>12</sup> Hart's sentiments are echoed in Matthew Guinn's later comment: southern writers of the Modernist and Renaissance periods "tended to pay a great deal of attention to dialect and local customs even as their themes sought to attain the universal" (xviii).

In the instances of Bobbie Ann Mason or Barbara Kingsolver, their lack of stereotyping has threatened their classification as Appalachian writers – though both remain “southern” writers for their treatment of more generalised regional issues.<sup>13</sup> Mason’s success in the 1980s and 1990s was as the progenitor of “K-Mart fiction” (where American regions cease to be individual entities, and the national landscape is portrayed as endless repetition of the same chain stores, restaurants, and gas stations), not as an Appalachian writer. Indeed, one critic decried Mason’s “contempt for ... soulless Kentucky rubes” (Malles, 38), while another described Mason’s Appalachia as “a culture dedicated to escaping the past in order to joy ride in the present, a present that would depart compulsively from all points of ancestral heritage” (Stuart, 48-49). Equally, although Taylor (of *The Bean Trees* (1988)), is just “a plain hillbilly from East Jesus Nowhere” (76), most of Kingsolver’s stories feature characters from other cultures (the Guatemalan immigrants and the Cherokees of *The Bean Trees*, and the Congolese in *The Poisonwood Bible*). Neither Mason nor Kingsolver is consistently identified as an Appalachian writer, though their importance as late twentieth-century *American* writers is often lauded.

On the other hand, Robert Morgan’s *Gap Creek* (2000), was chosen for Oprah’s Book Club and achieved subsequent commercial success (it sold 650,000 copies in hardcover). An accomplished Appalachian poet, Morgan peoples Gap Creek with hard-working, stoic characters who, if not entirely stereotypical, are very nearly prototypical Appalachians: on the first page, Morgan’s heroine speaks of her

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<sup>13</sup> It is important to note here that there are integral dissimilarities between Appalachia and the South in general. While the two regions may have become merged in the American imagination, natives of each place maintain a figurative and literal distance from the other: Appalachians are not southerners, and southerners are not Appalachians -- but the two regions maintain more commonalities with each other than with America as a whole. In an article that attempts to convince her audience of two Souths -- the South of the national imagination, and Appalachia -- Lee Smith writes that the *Gone With the Wind* South is absent from Appalachia. According to Smith, “the only columns in Buchanan County, Va., were on the Presbyterian Church. There were no black people ... Nobody had much money, and there was no aristocracy either -- unless we were the aristocracy, us town kids whose parents owned the stores and didn’t go down into the mines, who took pimiento cheese sandwiches to school in our lunch bags instead of the corn bread and buttermilk in a Mason jar brought by the kids from the hollers” (2006).

brother, and declares, “I seen him die” (1). Despite its popular reception, however (or perhaps because of it?), *Gap Creek* has been largely overlooked by scholars of southern literature. If the examples of Bobbie Ann Mason, Barbara Kingsolver, and Robert Morgan can be considered indicative of a general trend, then it would certainly seem that fiction written *by* Appalachians will only be considered Appalachian if it includes familiar references to the region’s peculiarities. Appalachian writers who choose not to take these peculiarities as their focus can indeed be successful, but they may no longer be considered Appalachians.

### **Appalachian Literature in Contemporary Media**

Appalachian literature has been precariously balanced since the late nineteenth century, as only a literature centred around such ambiguous concepts as “truth” and “legitimacy” can be. Appalachian writers must always be aware of their possible contribution to the ongoing devaluing of a culture, and so therefore must work to achieve their own balance between a personal truth and a cultural debt. Appalachian writers (and writers who have chosen to write about Appalachia) have historically varied in their approaches to the portrayal or avoidance of stereotype -- but they have always been conscious of its existence and importance. In general terms, Appalachian literature is pastoral, rural, and tends to involve characters (or caricatures of characters) who are hard-working, practical and often delightfully unpretentious. Humanity’s interaction with nature (and the subsequent realisation of powerlessness) often features prominently, as do struggles with poverty and educational deprivation. One of the most overlooked -- and yet, arguably the most important -- facets unifying Appalachian literature is voice, or the inclusion of the distinctive Appalachian dialect.

In Lisa Alther's 1976 novel, *Kinflicks*, the protagonist and sometimes narrator, Ginny, encounters a fellow southerner while she is living in Vermont. She recognises his home region by his accent, and inquires after the man's specific home town. Startled, he replies, "How did you know I was from the South?" Ginny "laughed," then thought to herself, "How does a sow know her piglets?" (421). Speakers from Appalachia, in addition to being "more exotic" or "more brutal" than the rest of the South, are more distinctive in their patterns of speech. Not only do their accents differ from those of other Americans (and other southerners), but their actual vocabulary does, too. A 1999 text on multicultural education identifies several different American dialects that deviate from Standard English: "Appalachian, Hawaiian, Creole, Tex-Mex, and Black English" (Sleeter and Grant, 49). The editors of *An American Vein* note in their introduction that "it is a life-changing experience for new generations to discover that their own local landscapes, their families and communities, have been truthfully portrayed in books by writers whose backgrounds are similar to their own" (Miller, Hatfield and Norman, xiii). This "life-changing experience," though, is dulled when not presented in an identifiable voice. A more carefully considered discussion of Chris Offutt's work will be presented in following chapters, but his feelings on this subject, expressed in a 2000 interview for *ACE Magazine*, lend valuable insight here. He speaks of Gurney Norman's influence on his own writing, as well as that of James Still. Offutt refers to Still's famed *River of Earth*, which he calls "a masterpiece of prose. The lesson of his carefully structured short stories is the use of syntax and idiom to imply dialect." Further, he notes that Norman's *Kinfolks: The Wilgus Stories* "showed me people I knew, talking in a language I'd grown up hearing" (Offutt, "Getting it Straight"). The responsibility of the Appalachian writer, then, is to create an authentic voice that can speak for a culture long silenced by isolation, lack of education, and a barrage of exaggerated assumptions.

In recent years, the internet has succeeded in giving Appalachians the opportunity to voice their opposition to popular stereotypes. In December, 2006, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jane Smiley published a piece in *The Huffington Post*, a politically liberal online news source, wherein she lauded David Hackett Fischer's *Albion's Seed* (1989). As its author explains, *Albion's Seed* is a lengthy explication of the history of groups of American settlers who originated in England. Fischer writes at length about the Appalachian group, depicting them as barbaric descendants of Scots-Irish Protestants. In her article, Smiley's preference for other groups -- the Puritans, Cavaliers, and Quakers -- is most obvious as she begins a paragraph on the Appalachians with an abrupt estimation of the natives: "Characteristics ... : mean as a snake and twice as quick." Her attempted mimicry of the native dialect establishes an immediate, negative sentiment, which becomes crystalline in the ensuing paragraphs. Smiley's "take" on Fischer's book is that "the ... Appalachian culture of hot-blooded and violent populism [...] is xenophobic, religiously aggressive, fundamentalist, and sectarian, [...] suspicious of learning, antagonistic towards 'elites,' and antipathetic to women's autonomy. It defines itself by masculinity and arms-bearing, is belligerent by nature and quick to take offense." This list of Appalachian stereotypes met with instant censure, and a heated intra-internet debate quickly arose. There were many outraged respondents, but two provide clear examples of the new intersection between literary criticism and the electronic media. The first comes from a weblog ("blog") called "Hillbilly Savants," whose tagline reads: "This blog is about *our* Appalachia - the real one, not the Hollywood-stereotype nor the third-world nation-esque stereotype being sold by do-gooders, or even the neo-Romantic sylvan stereotype that Rousseau would probably buy into." Eric Drummond Smith, of Knoxville, Tennessee and one of the Hillbilly Savants, expresses overt indignation at Smiley's concluding thought that Appalachians cannot be "assimilated" and therefore "can only be reduced, subdued, or dominated." Smith

fears Smiley's approach is akin to ghettoisation, and terms her summation of Appalachians

a grotesque caricature, as grotesque as those which portray us as barefoot, stupid, cousin-marrying, slackjawed, fools. The argument carries no more water than those who argue that secularism is a Northern/West Coast conspiracy, or those who argue [sic] that crime is essentially nothing more than a product of some inherent element of African American culture. It is disgusting, it is prejudiced, and it is offensive.

The other notable response to Smiley's indictment of the Appalachian people comes in the form of a contribution to "ePluribus Media," a website that advertises itself as "a collaborative journal for new media." Here, however, the author is Rodger Cunningham, the same scholar who hypothesised about Appalachia's "double Otherness." Cunningham had reviewed Fischer's book when it first appeared in 1989, and even participated in a debate with the author. His rebuke of Fischer's (and Smiley's) "facts" is inherently more academic in tone than Smith's; he couples his historical conceptualisation of Appalachia with psychological insight -- something that both Smiley and Fischer seem to have overlooked. Cunningham's reaction to Smiley's article verges on disbelief: "What a *hater* she is!" he exclaims, before referring to her as "a divider and a demonizer ... in a vulgarized reading of a flawed book, she thinks she's found a historical explanation for that total depravity, and can latch it onto one particular group of her fellow Americans. By labeling us as uniformly and incurably right-wing, she is only creating a self-fulfilling prophecy" ("Jane Smiley's Divell Theorie"). Cunningham's disbelief and his disappointment with Smiley's remarks is accompanied by dismay at the pervasive American acceptance, or propagation, of Appalachian "othering." That an ostensibly intelligent and well-educated person like Smiley can divorce her xenophobic statements from their more overtly racist predecessors substantiates the national acceptance of a devalued Appalachia. The companion message to Cunningham's rebuttal of Smiley's



remarks is the continuation of an “us” versus “them” mentality, one that reinforces notions of an inferior Appalachia and a superior mainstream America. The question, then, remains: are Appalachians “othered” by other Americans, or by Appalachians themselves? Surely it is both -- and that is the essence of the problem. The eradication of Appalachian stereotyping cannot occur without a unified, internal condemnation of the practice. Appalachians who try to draw a more authentic picture of the region will always be handicapped by those natives who fail to see the harm in propagating baseless versions of themselves.

In the next chapter, I turn to Chris Offutt’s particular representation of these ideas in his first collection of short stories, *Kentucky Straight*. Herein, Offutt finds success in the portrayal of distinctively Appalachian characters who indeed exist within “precisely delineated local settings and situations” (as noted by James Hart), but who also resonate with recognisable humanism. These are people -- not merely Appalachians -- who struggle with the expectations of their families and their communities, who negotiate a tricky path between adhering to traditions and moving forward, and who are determined to defend their homes and their history from the invasion of unrecognisable outsiders -- and what could be more universal than all that? In *Kentucky Straight*, Offutt has managed to create a space for himself that few other writers have: his story is both undeniably Appalachian, and acutely universal.

## Chapter 2

### **This is the Country Nobody Visits<sup>14</sup>: The Politics of Representation in *Kentucky Straight***

Towards the end of his life, William Faulkner attended many cultural events from the advantageous position of a renowned southerner speaking out against the perils of segregation. In the summer of 1955, William Faulkner travelled to Japan at the beginning of his three-month international tour on behalf of the U.S. State Department. Two speeches delivered that summer, published amongst a collection of seminar papers as *Faulkner at Nagano*, reveal both his desire for social change in the South and his uncertainty over how such change might occur. Of the South, Faulkner said: "I love it and hate it. Some of the things I don't like at all, but I was born there, and that's my home, and I will still defend it even if I hate it" (quoted in Gray, 1986: 171). Faulkner went on to say, "I love my country enough to want to cure its faults and the only way that I can cure its faults within my capacity, within my own vocation, is to shame it, to criticize it, to show the differences between its evils, its good" (Meriwether, 159). Faulkner recognised both the limitations of his craft and the necessity of expanding those limitations in order to demonstrate the strength of his convictions. Indeed, Faulkner was speaking to the plight of the African-American in the United States -- a people whose marginalisation is indeed a scar on the nation's history -- but his words find relevance in even a cursory examination of Chris Offutt's first collection of short stories, *Kentucky Straight* (1992).

This debut volume of Offutt's does not address the problems of racial segregation in the South; its implicit focus is the representation of another of the South's marginalised people: the Appalachians. The nine stories act as a book-length introduction to the topics that populate Offutt's later works. By dividing the stories

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<sup>14</sup> From Mark Strand's poem, "Another Place."

into three subcategories, the thematic elements tirelessly repeated in the remainder of this author's work are clearly revealed. In the mathematical precision governing the structure of *Kentucky Straight*, Offutt first exhibits his devotion to the careful calibration of the subjective form. Each of the nine stories is of roughly equal length, and focus on one of three principal ideas: the precarious psyche of a young boy and his relationship with his father and his home region, Appalachia; Offutt's interpretation of the mysticism of Appalachian culture; and the male code of honour in that culture. This chapter will examine *Kentucky Straight* through these disparate lenses, while maintaining a consciousness of the history and context of Appalachian literature. Most significantly, this chapter will discuss Chris Offutt's contribution to this region's literature, and his integration of stereotypes generally deemed offensive to Appalachian culture. Offutt's use of provocative imagery and metaphor does not necessarily align his stories with the work of Mary Noailles Murfree or John Fox, Jr.;<sup>15</sup> his appropriation of Appalachian stereotypes is authenticated by both his pedigree and his unrelenting and unapologetic identification with this marginalised culture. In this way, Offutt provides a conscious response to the uncertainty surrounding the nature of the future of Appalachian literature, by forcing a marriage between the previous enemies of stereotype and authenticity.

Early in *The Same River Twice*, Offutt's first memoir, the author discusses his familiarity with the reputation of Appalachia in the American consciousness. This place, according to "popular view ... is a land ... with men who buy half-pints of boot-legged liquor and throw the lids away in order to finish the whiskey in one laughing, brawling night, not caring where we wake up." These same men supposedly "eat spiders off the floor to display our strength," and are "a downright ornery bunch." This image, its pervasive presence attested to by such critics as Gurney Norman and Danny Miller, is false, according to Chris Offutt. More

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<sup>15</sup> John Fox Jr., of Big Stone Gap, Virginia, was a prominent Appalachian novelist of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. His most famous work was perhaps *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (1908).

precisely, he writes that “the dirt truth is a hair different” (SR, 19-20), and then goes on to speak vociferously in favour of this honour-driven society. Offutt is cognisant both of the existence of these stereotypical views of Appalachians, and the importance of denouncing such negative imagery. Offutt claims in his essay, “Getting it Straight,” that in writing *Kentucky Straight*, he “wanted to write a book that acknowledged the harshness of life in the hills, but refused to continue the popular lies.” “At the same time,” he noted, “I hoped to depict life in the hills as similar to life anywhere -- people striving to do well for themselves and their families” (2000).<sup>16</sup> How, then, does Offutt reconcile these aspirations with the final version of *Kentucky Straight*? Surely he cannot argue that this is a book devoid of Appalachian stereotypes.

On the contrary, William Schafer contends that “Offutt often uses stereotypes in lieu of that “dirt truth” he alleges” to disdain (51). *Kentucky Straight* is indeed replete with stereotypical images of Appalachian characters and life, but Offutt saves himself from castigating such figures in two very important ways: he firmly aligns himself with the characters he presents, claiming equal heritage and environment; and his language -- especially dialogue or the inner monologues of his narrators -- is unmistakably native. Schafer’s 1993 essay in the *Appalachian Journal* -- one of the few criticising Offutt’s work in a major publication -- simultaneously adores his “skilled, often gorgeous prose” and abjures Offutt’s vision of Appalachia. Offutt’s Appalachia, Schafer contends, is “peopled by deformed, imbecilic loonies who hack off their own body parts, shoot each other randomly, commit (or at least invite) incest, and either lapse into stuporous apathy or run away” (53). This critic’s impression of Offutt’s characters, while technically accurate, renders them virtually unrecognisable to the reader. There doubtlessly are instances of “deformed, imbecilic loonies” or “incest” -- but these are mere secondary characteristics of the stories, and

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<sup>16</sup> These sentiments will be revisited in Chapter 10, as Offutt describes his motivation behind returning, once again, to eastern Kentucky with his wife and children.

Offutt certainly does not describe his characters or their practices in such stark terms. *Kentucky Straight* reinforces one of the most solid precepts of Appalachian literature: the content of its stories is inextricably bound to the manner in which that content is presented. A sympathetic voice supersedes the inclusion of stereotypical images, as evidenced by such authors as Breece D’J Pancake. Pancake’s only collection of short stories, published posthumously in 1983, “placed his characters deep inside the culture and let them behave without apology or explanation” (Offutt, “Getting it Straight”). This is the new place for Appalachian stereotypes: in books written by Appalachians, that “acknowledge” that part of the “harshness” of living in these hills is attempting to synthesise the conception of oneself and one’s culture with the national imagery.

### **No Country for Young Men: The Struggle of Underage Protagonists in *Kentucky Straight***

*Kentucky Straight* is framed by a pair of narratives that focus on young, Appalachian men and their suspension between their native culture and the outside world. “Sawdust” follows Junior through his quest to obtain his high school equivalency certificate (which would then qualify him for jobs away from Appalachia), while “Nine-Ball” witnesses Junior’s escapist musings manifested in Everett, who concludes *Kentucky Straight* by driving “slowly out of the hollow ... trying to imagine living in a world without hills” (KS, 167). *Kentucky Straight*, at its genesis and its termination, is an address to the difficulties inherent in an Appalachian life, in a culture simultaneously tormented by fidelity to its traditions and the awareness of external progress. The aptitude of Junior and Everett -- or at least, their awareness of their intelligence and their subsequent desire to test themselves against external markers of intelligence -- impedes their ability to be fully

integrated into Appalachian society, and yet their inherent cultural markings make communication with the world outside Appalachia equally difficult. The authentic regional dialect of these boys, coupled with their obvious intelligence challenges the accepted stereotype of Appalachians and an ‘inferior’ intellect, supposedly evidenced by the distinctive mountain speech styles. The obverse elements of these stories -- the complexities of a figurative existence between cultures, in neither of which one is wholly accepted -- are effectively underpinned by the dramatisation of the politics of language.

The first narrator of *Kentucky Straight* is Junior (in “Sawdust”), a solitary young man whose immediate community comprises an unpredictable father, a mother who finds her son’s intelligence alienating, and Warren, a brother with whom he shares no commonalities. “Sawdust” initially details the mental decline of Junior’s father, who wanted to be a “horse doctor,” but had to “quit sixth grade on account of not having nothing to wear” (KS, 5). The father’s eventual suicide is precipitated by his inability to heal a puppy that had broken its leg in a fall; this failure is the culmination of the father’s failures, the manifestation of an increasingly unrecognisable dream. Warren is the elder brother, but Offutt’s naming the protagonist “Junior” indicates the younger son’s filial duty to realise the unfulfilled dreams of his father. Cultural and actual poverty prevented Junior’s father from becoming a veterinarian, but the arrival of VISTA workers in Rocksalt (their small home town) gives Junior the opportunity to atone for his father’s disadvantages. Offutt describes VISTA as “upper middle-class young white people [who] tended to join in order to help out groups of people that the government decided needed help ... The rest came to look at exotic hillbillies, then went home” (Palmer, 30).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The entirety of the events of *Kentucky Straight* occur within the confines of the hand-drawn map Offutt provides, leaving the outside world to be represented by delegates, in the form of aid workers from organisations such as VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) or the WPA (Works Progress Administration). These organisations have historically been largely impotent in their offer of ‘help’ to the Appalachian people; Offutt’s obvious disdain for the VISTA workers translates fictionally into their inability to effectively communicate with these “exotic hillbillies.”

Junior's receipt of his high school diploma leads to the expectation that he will use this credential to garner employment away from home. That Junior chooses *not* to leave Appalachia in the end -- and the VISTA worker's disbelief at his decision -- introduces Offutt's manifest assertion of the innate cultural value of Appalachia, and creates a new synthesis for Appalachian characters. In Junior lies the novel coexistence of intelligence and ambition with a conscious desire to remain in Appalachia. Junior's informed need for stasis dramatises an antithesis to the recent exodus of Appalachians, all in search of an elusive "better life" beyond the hills and hollows of home.

The introductory paragraph to "Sawdust" -- narrated by Junior -- illuminates the protagonist's exclusion from both his native culture and that of mainstream America:

Not a one on this hillside finished high school. Around here a man is judged by how he acts, not how smart he's supposed to be. I don't hunt, fish, or work. Neighbors say I think too much. They say I'm like my father and Mom worries that maybe they're right. (KS, 3)

The phrasing and cadence of this passage identify its location: a rural, depressed region of America. The further explication of the low value placed on intelligence relies on stereotypical assumptions about Appalachia's struggles with education, while Junior's disassociation from cultural norms places him at the periphery of this impoverished society. Of the five sentences forming this paragraph, the last four are devoid of distinctive dialect; the first, however, clearly aligns the narrator with the culture from which he considers himself removed. The phrase, "not a one" (instead of the more generic "no one") both connects the speaker with Appalachia and discounts him from inclusion in broader American society. Proponents of multicultural education Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant identify five American dialects (of which Appalachian is one) that exist "in addition to Standard English"

(49); educators have been “cautioned” against a “deficiency orientation toward the speech of ... non-Standard English dialect speakers” that would identify those speakers as “incorrect, poor, and ‘destitute’” (Newton, 1966: 49). Junior, clearly unable to integrate into Appalachian society because of his propensity to “think too much” and his community’s subsequent disdain for such thought, will also be unacceptable to non-Appalachian society, due to the alienating nature of his dialect. Junior’s interaction with the VISTA worker in town (the only representation of external America within the story) is strained, as she continually misinterprets Junior’s comments. Offutt’s politicisation of linguistic differences indicates not that this is the only division between Appalachians and outsiders, but that as long as the two disparate entities do not speak the same language, little hope exists for their unification.

As Junior arrives at the testing centre, the bored aid worker assumes that Junior has entered the building accidentally, and tells him that the “barbershop is next door.” Junior’s response -- his first spoken sentence in “Sawdust” -- aligns him with his native culture, those with whom he cannot relate: “I don’t want a haircut, ma’am. I might could use one but that ain’t what I come to town for” (KS, 7). The VISTA worker repeats Junior’s “ain’t,” and he rightly interprets that as her “mocking me.” This is the first of several exchanges between Junior and the aid worker that display a marked distinction between the local dialect and her capacity for understanding. She refers to Appalachians as “you people” (KS, 8), and is surprised to see Junior actually return to take his exam. The fissure in communication is clearest when the aid worker inquires as to the financial status of Junior’s family. She wonders at their source of income, and asks, “how do you and your mother get along?” but Junior misses the externally colloquial reference and answers her literally: “We don’t talk much” (KS, 11). The “lady” informs Junior that he is living



in poverty, but “it struck me funny that I had to take a test to learn I was living in poverty” (KS, 12).<sup>18</sup>

Offutt’s concern, within questions of cultural belonging, focuses on the nature of intelligence. His use of the first-person narrative voice allows the reader to recognise the difficulties Junior faces in trying to navigate between his innate cleverness and voracity for reading, and a culture that jeers him, and mockingly calls him “doctor.” The author discusses the difference between intelligence and education in a 1998 interview, noting that “some of the smartest people I’ve ever met are in those hills and don’t have high school educations. Incredibly smart ... “Sawdust” [is about] a different approach to the concept of education” (Palmer, 28). Junior’s mother and his brother, Warren, cannot understand his passion for learning, although their loyalty is never in doubt. Warren tells his younger brother, “I’ll fight for you, Junior. And for Daddy, too. But I never could figure what either of you ever was up to” (KS, 14). What Junior is “up to” is testing himself to see if he belongs in a world outside of Rocksalt, and, necessarily, determining the merits of that world. After the VISTA worker muses that she does not know what she is “doing here,” Junior says, “None of us do ... Most people around here are just waiting to die.” The woman tells him, “That’s not funny,” and it appears as though Junior has as disparaging a view of his home region as the aid worker does, until he delivers his punch line: “What’s funny is, everybody gets up awful early anyhow” (KS, 15).

“Sawdust’s” conclusion refutes the popular conception of Appalachia as an inferior culture: not only does Junior choose to stay home, knowing that he could move on, but -- more importantly -- he recognises the innate value of that culture. The outside view of Appalachian insularity is disdainful, but “Sawdust” reinforces the notion that this region remains isolated by choice; any help visited upon its natives has been unsolicited. Junior’s choice refutes the popular idea that

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<sup>18</sup> As Offutt later explains in his essay, “Porn Bought My Football,” “the War on Poverty had begun and young people arrived with halfbaked ideas of how to help us ... At the time, we considered our saviors supremely ignorant” (49).

Appalachians remain in place simply because of a lack of better options; “Sawdust” argues that, in fact, Appalachia *is* the better option. Conventional concepts of American superiority and inferiority hold no resonance in Offutt’s introduction to *Kentucky Straight*, though the author will continually revisit these ideas for the purpose of challenge and dissemination. Offutt demonstrates the ridiculousness of forcing “help” not only onto those who do not want it but also those who do not necessarily need it.

The second story of *Kentucky Straight* to be narrated by a young man who both thinks and speaks in the Appalachian dialect is “Blue Lick,” which follows two brothers through their troubled negotiations with various social services. The narrator is never named, but identifies himself as the custodian of his younger brother, Little Elvis, “who can’t talk plain” (KS, 116). It is apparent that Little Elvis suffers from some sort of learning disability; the irony, of course, is that to an outside observer, neither the narrator nor Little Elvis can “talk plain.” If Appalachians in general are doubly othered (according to Rodger Cunningham), then Little Elvis is triply othered by his Appalachian-ness, and the additional distancing factor of his mental retardation and subsequent internal isolation. “Blue Lick” is framed by the narrator’s encounters with yet another VISTA aid worker, here identified as “the funny-talked lady” (KS, 115). As with Junior, Offutt makes it clear that these boys are unusually intelligent, and that their intelligence is recognised both by other Appalachians and select outsiders.

“Blue Lick” is remarkable within Offutt’s work, though, for one disturbing feature: it is the only instance in which a character has a positive (albeit dysfunctional) relationship with his father.<sup>19</sup> The father in this story is portrayed as a man punished by state and federal laws (i.e., forces external to Appalachia) for

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<sup>19</sup> Vaughn’s relationship with his grandfather in “Old of the Moon” is also positive, but the distance of their generations nullifies any direct comparison to other father/son relationships in Offutt’s work.

following the codes of cultural justice (i.e., internal forces). He was first incarcerated for stealing a car from the man cuckolding him, and at the end of the story, for stealing a car from the man who had shot his dog. This sort of vigilantism (also demonstrated in Junior's fight with the boys who had insulted his father) perpetuates the insularity of the region, as these men demonstrate the efficacy of independent governance. The policemen who arrive to arrest the narrator's father in "Blue Lick" are as extraneous to the community as the VISTA worker is; both professions represent the futility of imposing outside ideas upon a self-sufficient culture. "After Daddy got out of [prison]," the narrator relates, he burned down the barn of the man who had been conducting the affair with his wife, "but nobody told the law" (KS, 117). In eastern Kentucky, the "law" is superfluous to a more traditionally ingrained system of crime and punishment, and while the narrator recognises the official status of the men who finally arrive to arrest his father, he refuses to cooperate with their requests. The police officer smiles at the narrator and Little Elvis, and refers to him as "son." The young narrator firmly insists, "I ain't your son" (KS, 124), and the policemen give up trying to use the children to incriminate the father. One cop realises that "Nothing that kid says will do us any good" (KS, 123) -- that kid could be Little Elvis, whose words never do anyone much good, or it could be the narrator, who chooses deliberately obtuse language in order to relate his unwavering sense of loyalty to his father. In "Blue Lick," the same man who has had the affair with the narrator's mother is also the man who has turned the father in to the police; this man's honour, as well as his fealty to cultural law are muddled by his actions, whereas the narrator's allegiances are very clear.

The father of the narrator and Little Elvis grooms his sons to uphold traditional precepts of Appalachian masculinity. He tells his boys, "Shoot to kill ... never wound. Fold a three-flush after five. Don't give women gifts. Always throw the first punch" (KS, 122). The details of life in Appalachia are termed in absolutes,

and the father's litany of paternal wisdom echoes the speech patterns of the narrator of "Blue Lick" and of Junior in "Sawdust" in its simplicity. A teacher in "Blue Lick" once gave the narrator a paddling; he got "twelve licks ... Six for saying thank you when the teacher said I was wise, and six more for laughing after the first six licks" (KS, 123). Just as Junior misinterprets the VISTA woman's meaning of the phrase "get along," the narrator here misinterprets his teacher's meaning of "wise." The lives of these boys, like their language, are not ruled by innuendo or nuance; they are guided by a logic derived from practicality. The narrator describes their trials over learning to wipe themselves after using the toilet shack; he says that "me and Little Elvis went to the woods mostly. He used poison vine to wipe with once and never did wipe again after" (KS, 118). The logic of such a decision only appears flawed to those repulsed by the notion of primitive toilet habits, but Little Elvis's thought process is sound: he discontinued doing that which was most offensive -- giving himself a rash. It never occurs to the narrator or Little Elvis that their way of life is incorrect -- that is, until his father's latest incarceration forces him to consult with the VISTA worker, who "asked if there was anything I needed. I'd never thought I needed anything but if she was asking, maybe there was" (KS, 125). Again, Offutt creates a dichotomy not only between native Appalachians and the people trying to "help" them, but between the perspectives of those two groups. The boys had all they needed at home; perhaps, Offutt indicates, the fault lies not with a supposedly deficient Appalachian lifestyle, but with the American conceptualisation of "need."

Everett, the eldest of these young protagonists of *Kentucky Straight*, is featured in its final story, "Nine-Ball." He works on his father's hog farm during the day, but escapes at night by driving to a pool hall near Lick Fork Creek. Everett is desperate to distance himself from his life's deficiencies: his alcoholic father, his whorish sister, his stigmatisation due to his physical imperfection (a walleye), and his

truck that reeks of hog. As he drives through Bobcat Hollow on his way to the pool hall, he “wondered what he could see if hills weren’t everywhere he looked” (KS, 152). He is imprisoned by his life, only finding refuge at the pool table or in the woods. The sole help the WPA has given to Everett is the fifty-year old grade school, on the verge of closing, where he and his father collect slops to feed their hogs. His father refers to him as the “runt” of his litter, but at the pool hall, Everett is in command: “there were no secrets in pool, no hidden trouble ... Everett could make the balls do what he wanted” (KS, 153). And so, on one particular night at the pool hall, when Jesse the coal worker infiltrates his sanctum, Everett’s loose hold on control begins to wane. Usually, he lives his life like he shoots pool on these imperfectly-finished tables, “banking the balls around a slash in the felt” (KS, 155). All of the imperfections of his life are mere slashes in the felt, and he has been negotiating a tenuous path around them.

On this night, though, Everett has reached his limit: he sees Jesse’s “new red pickup with a gun rack in the rear window” and hears Jesse’s friend with his sister in the back of a van, and knows the time has come to leave this place. He handily wins a series of pool games against the obnoxious Jesse, eventually taking the intruder’s gun rack as boot, and goes home. Everett stops by the hog pen, and makes “a small opening. The runt could go if it wanted to. It would probably get killed on the road, but it would die here anyway” (KS, 167). Everett’s decision -- to leave or to stay -- allegorises Offutt’s own experiences, as well as the experiences of countless other Appalachians who have had to make the agonising choice between the comfort of the familiar and the allure of the broader world. To leave is frightening, and possibly dangerous, but to stay is to stagnate, to become stifled by a community that is continually shrinking. “Nine-Ball,” as the last story of *Kentucky Straight*, forms a perfect segue into Offutt’s next work, *The Same River Twice*, which sees the author himself set off into the world, desperate for a new life that he thought he wanted. He

imbues in Everett the knowledge that he has accrued along his journey: to be of these hills and then to venture forth is to be a perpetual stranger, happy in no place.

Through Junior and Everett, Offutt demonstrates the nature of the difficulties that Appalachians face when examining their relationship with this region: the tension between the familiar and the exciting unknown.<sup>20</sup> For Junior, Appalachia is where he chooses to remain, though he has the opportunity to leave, while Everett finds this region stifling. Junior wants to stay -- though he needed to know that he *could* leave -- but Everett cannot wait to leave. The narrator of "Blue Lick," however, demonstrates the sort of blissful ignorance that typifies another Appalachian experience. He lives in the idyll of the woods, seeking neither escape nor improvement. Moreover, he is resentful of the implication that either is necessary or desirable. In portraying the divergence of these three characters, Offutt further demonstrates that Appalachia is not one composite whole: it is many things to many different people.

### **You Can't Fault the Hills for What Happens in Them: New Appalachian Mysticism**

Gurney Norman argues persuasively that non-native readers of Appalachian literature approach this region's fiction with assumptions about the innate mythology of that place; Appalachia unconsciously embodies, for other Americans, a domestic region so peculiar that its "reality" naturally takes on a cast of mysticism. The three stories of *Kentucky Straight* that contain "mythic" elements -- "The Leaving One," "Old of the Moon," and "Aunt Granny Lith" -- rely on national misconceptions of Appalachian lore to validate its cultural "oddities." Offutt's later work -- particularly *No Heroes* -- demonstrates a truth that has been implicit since *Kentucky Straight*: Appalachia *is* the story, not merely the backdrop against which the story is set.

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<sup>20</sup> These ideas will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7.

The fantastical stories of *Kentucky Straight* have an apparent religious significance that Offutt's later work (oddly, in the case of *No Heroes*) lacks. All three of these stories draw on biblical sources for their foundations: the characters Elijah and Vaughn of "The Leaving One" are loosely based on Elisha and Elijah from the Old Testament, while "Old of the Moon" is a representation of the diverging philosophies of the Old and New Testaments. "Aunt Granny Lith" is the story most obviously embedded in classical and biblical mythology, and is an amalgam of the book of Ruth, an eastern European folk story, and the Eleusinian Mysteries from ancient Greece (Offutt, "Getting it Straight"). Offutt's integration of external folklore can be understood as an ironic attempt at universalising Appalachian people and custom. By rooting his work in classical or biblical stories -- commonly accepted as the framework of western literature -- Offutt is essentialising the Appalachian experience. Within this structure, he is free to cloak his mythological characters in the stereotypical garb of Appalachia -- because they are *basically* the same as their biblical counterparts, or their classical ones, or any other literary character that takes those sources as its guide.

The penultimate story of *Kentucky Straight*, "Aunt Granny Lith," chronicles the decline of morality in contemporary society. Offutt emphasises gendered difference to further support his assertions about the integrity of various forms of knowledge, while accentuating the importance of cultural traditions in contemporary Appalachian society. The title character of Aunt Granny Lith is a spectre of the traditional lifestyle, unable to exist in the present as she had done in the past.<sup>21</sup> She is the "last granny-woman in these parts," a midwife who "caught three hundred babies on this creek." Aunt Granny Lith once occupied a vital role in the community, until "that hospital got built in Rocksalt. She got withered up like a blight hit her, and disappeared off creation" (KS, 139). A "blight" has indeed "hit her," as it has hit the

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<sup>21</sup> The name "Lith," combined with "Lil," forms "Lilith," "the name of Adam's first wife who was banished to a cave for the crime of consorting with demons" (Offutt, "Getting it Straight").

rest of Appalachia: modernity has come to this final stronghold of isolation, rendering Aunt Granny Lith redundant. The hospital's arrival signals the departure of long-held Appalachian traditions espoused by Aunt Granny Lith, causing an historical rupture between the concrete ethos of the past and the muddled lifestyles of the present. Aunt Granny Lith is implicated in the deaths of Casey's<sup>22</sup> first two wives, ostensibly out of simple jealousy, and appears superficially to be a demonic remnant of cultural history. As Casey -- who is of the next, progressive generation of Appalachians and, like the hospital, a symbol of contemporary society -- explains his initial interaction with Aunt Granny Lith, though, it becomes apparent that it is she who has been victimised; Casey's own insouciance is responsible for the deaths of his wives. Twenty years previously (although after the construction of Rocksalt's hospital), while Casey and his friend, Duck, had been playing hide-and-seek on Flatgap Ridge, Casey noticed a hand protruding from an old log. Assuming the hand to be Duck's, Casey slipped "a ring whittled out of a buckeye with my initials carved on it" on the finger of that hand, and declared "I take you as my wife ... 'til death do us part" (KS, 138). Aunt Granny Lith interprets Casey's joking declaration literally, because to her traditional sense of morality, the vows of marriage are sacred. Casey's flagrant and repeated mockery of the sanctity of their marriage is emblematic of the turpitude that has accompanied the modernisation of Appalachia. It is unclear if Aunt Granny Lith has physically caused the deaths of Casey's wives, but Offutt depicts their respective demises as punishment for transgressing against the sacred bonds of marriage.

Casey's present wife, Beth, and her mother, Nomey (named for Naomi, the biblical mother of Ruth), occupy that odd space between modern practicality and blind obeisance of mythology. Beth and Nomey's ability to utilise their knowledge of the past to combat the threat of Aunt Granny Lith portrays them as an integral link

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<sup>22</sup> Casey is the husband of Beth and the son-in-law of Nomey, who is terrified that Aunt Granny Lith will kill Beth as she did his first two wives.



between the past and the present. In doing so, Offutt engenders divergent forms of knowledge, aligning the female with the superstitious and the male with the tangible. Nomey wears “a piece of black moly root ... on a strip of leather tight above her hips,” and believes in the efficacy of the root’s powers.<sup>23</sup> Casey, however, refuses to acknowledge the validity of this feminine knowledge; he exclaims, “That ain’t my way ... Someone crosses me, I stay crossed. I plow, hunt, and chop. I work, by God. I work!” (KS, 142). Casey’s knowledge, however, has not “worked” -- he has not been able to solve the problem of Aunt Granny Lith. He claims to have never “seen” a token work, but Nomey insists that “It’s knowing more than seeing” (KS, 142). Offutt thus devalues the tangible, and asserts the validity of faith in the ethereal. Beth and Nomey’s belief in the methodologies of the past are further endorsed by the success of Casey’s reluctant consummation of his initial marital vow to Aunt Granny Lith. Beth and Nomey’s alternative knowledge thus schematically evolves from a seemingly frivolous devotion to mythology to a bridge spanning the chasm between past and present.

Casey’s foray onto the Flatgap Ridge is intended to placate Aunt Granny Lith, thus preventing her from doing any harm to Beth in the future. What is also clear, though, is that Casey cannot be a husband to Beth or a father to their baby until he atones for his primary sin and learns to respect the bonds of marriage. Casey will always be haunted by Aunt Granny Lith unless he makes appropriate reparations. Casey’s ignorance of such reparations underpins the fundamental necessity of Beth and Nomey, whose knowledge facilitates Casey’s physical atonement. The internal narrative of “Aunt Granny Lith” is Offutt’s depiction of modernity’s responsibility to the precepts of the past, and it indicates that female knowledge is central to the survival of those precepts.

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<sup>23</sup> Moly root is “what Odysseus carried to counteract the spells of the sorceress Circe” (Offutt, “Getting it Straight”).

The entirety of “Aunt Granny Lith,” however, is not contained within this instructive section: this narrative is framed by the tale of Casey’s rescue, by Beth, from the clutches of an amorous and amoral neighbour. Separated from its framing anecdote, the central story of “Aunt Granny Lith” ends with Casey’s return from his visit to the cave, his fifteen days of rest, and symbolic rebirth: when he is finally able to communicate, he “lowered his face to his hands and cried for a long time” (KS, 145). Casey, it seems, has surrendered himself to the egregious error he has made, taken measures to amend that error, and has come back to his wife, ready to begin their life anew. The redemptive power of this narrative, though, is undermined by the tale of Beth’s journey to collect her philandering husband. This event occurs *after* Casey has dealt with Aunt Granny Lith; any ‘lesson’ that Casey supposedly learned from that incident is superseded by his persistent inability to choose the correct moral path.

Casey’s encounter with Aunt Granny Lith, at the insistence of Beth and Nomey, has not taught him marital loyalty or moral fortitude; instead, he continues to produce illegal moonshine and becomes so intoxicated that he abandons his wife in search of an extramarital dalliance. The concluding sentences of “Aunt Granny Lith” expose the futility of Beth and Nomey’s feminine efforts to realign Casey’s moral compass; after she has fought off his would-be mistress, been hit with a fireplace poker, walked two miles home to fetch their mule, then used logging chains to haul their wrecked truck from the creek, Casey tells her: “You always did hurt too easy” (KS, 147). Earlier, after he had caused their truck to crash, Casey had “snored on the floorboards, short, thick arms pillowing his head” as he lay in the foetal position, trusting that Beth would, again, rescue him. The absurdity of his chastisement of her supposed weakness succeeds, ultimately, in infantilising Casey and allowing the women’s knowledge to subsume his own ignorance. Finally, as the couple lie together in bed, Beth enfolds Casey in her femininity: “he smelled of dirt and

moonshine. She lifted her knees to guide him with her thighs” (KS, 147). The remnants of what Casey can “see” with his knowledge -- dirt and moonshine, the fruits of his labour -- cling to him, as he clings to Beth and her intimate understanding of all that Casey cannot see.

The middle story of *Kentucky Straight*, “Old of the Moon,” comprises a trio of layered narratives that transport the reader back through four generations of Kentucky history. This story is a commentary on the degrading effects of modernity to Appalachian culture, as evidenced by the advent of the New Testament and abject religious faith. The central story of “Old of the Moon” embodies historical Appalachia; it is the narrative of Tar Cutler (who was “old as stone” (KS, 74) before he was found dead in his cabin), who heard it from his “grandpaw,” who “heard it off his daddy back before the Silver War” (KS, 76). Tar Cutler’s story is witnessed in the present by Cody, a man who had been “wicked ... for thirty years of his life,” until lightning struck and killed his horse. “The next day,” Offutt writes, “Cody shaved his beard, gave away his rifle, three pistols, two quarts of liquor, and nine decks of greasy cards ... He joined the Clay Creek Church of God” (KS, 74). Cody’s religious conversion is aligned with a contemporary perception of God’s presence in the natural world, and thus Cody’s self-identification as “proof of the Lord’s work” does not lead initially to any suspicion. Offutt’s first criticism of Cody’s conversion to faith comes upon the preacher’s discovery of Tar Cutler’s body, which had been “gnawed by rats[:]” Cody spat on the floor, angry at having come all this way for nothing” (KS, 75). Cody has come to Tar Cutler’s house with the hopes of convincing the older man (and subsequently, his extensive family) to attend Cody’s first tent revival. The preacher’s derisive gesture at the sight of Tar Cutler’s dead body indicates a disregard for human life that contradicts his recently-constructed spirituality.

Tar Cutler's tape-recorded reminiscences provide a vital, tangible link between the past and the present: he is a remnant, like Aunt Granny Lith, of the old world, forced to exist in a culture no longer recognisable as his own. Offutt writes that "Tar hadn't been to church since the preachers had given up the Old Testament for the New," aligning modernity with the precepts of the New Testament and highlighting Tar Cutler's unwillingness to participate in a culture dictated by this second version of the Bible. The primary chasm between the Old and New Testaments centres upon their differing approaches to sin and redemption. The New Testament offers forgiveness for sins, whereas the Old does not; Offutt, in coupling previous generations of Appalachians with Tar Cutler and the precepts of the Old Testament, is further commenting on the moral certitude of that era. Advocates of the New Testament argue that the Old Testament is imperfect because of its inability to forgive sin, but Offutt's use of Tar Cutler's tape-recorded story is in essence an indictment against the contemporary ambiguity governing morality. The characters included in Tar Cutler's narrative act in accordance with natural truths and certainties; they do not have the modern luxury of forgiveness. As the three men walk through the woods in search of the offending bear, Wayne comments to Clabe that Jim is "about like Peter, ain't he." In reply, Clabe asks, "What? ... Who?" (KS, 80). Peter's Biblical story relies almost wholly on the New Testament, and the covenant of these men does not include that modernised version.

The central narrative of "Old of the Moon" illustrates a traditional fealty to natural patterns, not blind faith in an arbitrarily forgiving God.<sup>24</sup> Introducing his story, Tar Cutler claims, "You can't fault the hills for what happens in them. Some people blame God, but I don't think he is too bad off worried over what goes on

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<sup>24</sup> The title phrase, "Old of the Moon," reflects the traditional Appalachian agricultural technique of following lunar cycles in order to ensure the best crops. Mountain people believed that onions (some say all crops that grow underneath the ground) should be planted in the 'old of the moon' (that is, towards the end of the lunar cycle). Other folk legends instruct homesteaders to make soap during this period, or kill livestock. Such directions echo Beth and Nomey's belief in the power of the moly root and traditional problem-solving methods.

here” (KS, 77). The Appalachia familiar to Tar Cutler is isolated from modernity -- that is, until the “road was built twenty-six years ago” (KS, 76); this road, like the hospital in “Aunt Granny Lith,” signals the end of tradition. Tar Cutler “fired shots at VISTA workers, census takers, and tax men” (KS, 74) -- all emblems of modernity’s intrusion into the sanctity of Appalachia’s isolation -- but ultimately could not defend his region against the influx of American advancements. The introduction of external customs into Appalachia, supposedly a positive movement, is likened to the replacement of the Old Testament with the New.

Tar Cutler’s children all travelled the new road leading out of Appalachia, leaving him alone, but “now they want [him] to teach their kids the olden ways” (KS, 76). Tar’s daughter has sent him the tape recorder so that he can record his memories of the old days, but “telling ain’t hardly the same with no kids to listen at me” (KS, 76). Technology has, for these people, not encouraged intimacy but replaced it. Like the highway’s relentless vacuuming of Appalachia’s newest generations, the tape recorder is sucking the marrow of the community (i.e., Tar’s legacy of memory) without giving anything in return. Similarly, Offutt devalues the New Testament: newness does not indicate superiority, and the New Testament still relies on the Old for its foundational concepts, just as contemporary Appalachians rely on the past for its “olden ways.”

At the end of the third narrative -- the story about the decapitated baby and the bear -- Tar returns to the subject of his home, and its fate. He recalls that “bear and panther were all killed off in Grandpaw’s day. In mine, we cleared out the bobcat and coyote. My sons were left with snakes to kill. The hills are safe now but folks still leave. At night there’s not so many stars as used to be ... I’m going to bed” (KS, 88). The integration of Appalachia into mainstream American society is at the cost of its authenticity, its characteristics that define its cultural identity. In the past two generations, technological advancements and civic infrastructure have enabled -- and

encouraged -- Appalachians to leave home, tantalising them with offers of secure employment or better education for their children. What is gained in economic security is lost in the truisms of a culture that depended on its distinctiveness as the foundation of its identity. The bear and the panther that Tar Cutler's grandfather once hunted are emblematic of the ruggedness of that generation of Appalachian people; as those wild animals have been killed off, so too have the cultural disparities between the mainstream and the marginalised in America. The interstate has provided an avenue of escape for scores of younger Appalachians, though it has not facilitated the type of exchange its terminology advertises.

"The Leaving One" is the first of Offutt's work to introduce not only elements of mythology but of surrealism, which is especially conspicuous in light of the hyperrealist tone of most of his other work.<sup>25</sup> This story -- the lengthiest of this collection -- pays particular homage to man's relationship with nature, and especially with the woods. "The Leaving One" is the prototypical, late twentieth-century American fable: a man comes home from war, certainly changed and likely damaged by his experiences in conflict, only to find that his home and his people are unwilling to accept his new self. The man subsequently withdraws from society and inures himself to the elements, forcing a unification with the creatures that inhabit the woods. This story encompasses merely two pages, as told by the man's estranged daughter; the remainder of the narrative is devoted to the woodsman's (Elijah) mythical reappearance and subsequent relationship with his grandson, Vaughn. Elijah represents the prophet Elijah, and Vaughn stands for Elijah's disciple, Elisha. Elijah's story, of great importance to both the Christian and Jewish faiths, is detailed in the Books of Kings, first included in the Hebrew Bible and later in the Old Testament. The Jewish faith considers Elijah to be the precursor to the coming of the Messiah, while Christians believe that Elijah will appear before the Second Coming of Christ.

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<sup>25</sup> Offutt's recent essay, "Decirculating the Monkey," is his only other major foray into surrealism.

Elisha was selected by God as Elijah's successor in the prophetic office, and became Elijah's attendant until Elijah was taken up to heaven, seven or eight years later.

One day, as Vaughn attempts to knock walnuts from a tree, his grandfather appears. Vaughn's intimacy with the woods is obvious, but his genetic predisposition to such intimacy is only revealed later, as Elijah demonstrates his own vast knowledge of the woods and its residents. He tells his grandson late in the story that "we're not just traipsing these hills, boy. We're walking with the woods" (KS, 47). Together, Elijah and Vaughn track a deer "with a sixteen-point rack," just by closing their eyes and allowing the deer to "show himself" (KS, 51). Elijah, aware that his death is imminent, has appointed Vaughn to be his disciple, the one to whom he can pass on his knowledge of the woods. In response to Vaughn's uncertainty over his grandfather's existence, Elijah "blew a burst of warm air against Vaughn's face" and asks, "feel that?" (KS, 37); it is apparent that there exists a disparity between myth and reality. Elijah is "an old man with long hair matted by leaf and twig," a "deer-hide shirt draped loose over his body" and with "ragged fringe [tying] oak leaves to his shirt" (KS, 36). He possesses the "ungodly woodskills" (SR, 19) of the Melungeon<sup>26</sup> people, and is deliberately portrayed as other-worldly. And so, Vaughn's perspective shifts: his previous reality, with a mother who believes in geese walking over gravestones (KS, 36) and who uses salt to ward off bad luck brought into the house by a stray bird (KS, 40), now lacks the rationality that his grandfather embodies. Vaughn's mother, Elijah's daughter, tells the story of her father's retreat from society after his return from the first world war; Offutt posits the supposed "reality" of their culture against the "myth" of Elijah's world. During a baptism ceremony, performed by an overzealous country preacher, another of Elijah's daughters lost consciousness; Elijah appeared from the woods and revived his daughter by performing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Instead of being heralded for

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<sup>26</sup> The Melungeons are a subgroup of Appalachians with unknown genealogy. Their role in this region's culture will be more closely considered in Chapter 8.

his efforts, Elijah was accused of perversity, and once again shunned from the community. Offutt's intentional displacement of myth and reality (or the illogical versus the logical) can be transcribed to a discussion of Appalachia or any other marginalised region, wherein the central society is considered normal (or "real" or "logical") and the distanced region is perceived as abnormal. Just as the Appalachian society depicted in "The Leaving One" is generally nonsensical, and the marginalised entity (Elijah in the woods) is supremely reasonable, so too (Offutt implicitly argues) is Appalachia not the backwards Other to America. Merely because the peripheral faction appears mythical does not necessarily make it so.

The structure of these stories -- i.e., their historical retrospectives -- says as much about the ugliness of the contemporary world and the idyll of the past as the actual language and content of the narratives. In formulating these stories in this way, Offutt suggests that contemporary Appalachians are powerless to move forward without the anchoring and instructive knowledge of their collective past. Moreover, the author's examination of these aspects of Appalachian lore highlight what is obviously a rich and provocative cultural history, one that is in imminent danger of being eradicated by the homogenisation of its region.

### **A Man's Lucky to Have These Hills: Demonstrations of Masculinity in Appalachian Culture**

In the final group of narratives of *Kentucky Straight*, Offutt presents male protagonists in direct conflict with other men, utilising the gravity of these situations to construct an image of Appalachian masculinity that is reinforced by varying standards of honour and morality. In crisis, the behaviour of the men upon whom Offutt directs his focus in "Horseweed," "House Raising," and "Smokehouse," indicates a sense of Appalachian manhood that is evolving at pace with the general culture. William (of "Horseweed") realises that what was "right" for his father and



his grandfather has become “wrong” in contemporary society, and he must reconcile the old customs with an increasingly unrecognisable culture. The men of “House Raising” must cast aside their racist beliefs in order to save a life; they do so reluctantly, led by the interaction between Mercer and Coe, who herald a new sort of Appalachian honour. Finally, the participants in a late-night poker game (in “Smokehouse”) chronicle the degradation of this culture’s masculine customs and traditions.

William, the main character of “Horseweed,” is emblematic of the evolution of Appalachia. Like Tar Cutler, William is a man conscious of the changes his environment has undergone, both physically and culturally, and he is aware of his tenuous position within an uncertain historical legacy. William’s grandfather and father were both coal miners, but his grandfather had also bootlegged liquor, “to keep his kids in clothes” (KS, 59). Now, William is growing marijuana to earn extra money, because his wife wants the luxury of an indoor bathroom. He has no sons, but he wonders “what the state would find to outlaw in his grandsons’ time” (KS, 67). The land has given this family the opportunity to make their lives a bit better, but the encroachment of the coal companies (and their obsessive protection of company land) makes even this simple task dangerous. “A man’s lucky to have these hills,” William’s father had once told him. “I know it,” William said. “But they ain’t exactly ours no more” (KS, 59). While checking his illegal marijuana plants in the woods one night, William encounters a man who has been bitten by a snake. This man is a representative of the coal company, sent as their envoy to protect their economic interests in the hills that no longer belong to the people who populate them. William’s decision to help the injured man is a vivid cultural marker, and he is aware of the burgeoning distance between the traditions of his father and grandfather, and himself.

As he sets off for the woods that night, he carries with him a rifle, “patterned” by “walnut whorls ... It had belonged to his father, and his grandfather” (KS, 61). As he walks with the woods, William is holding on to his history. Unlike his father and grandfather, though, who used violence and secrecy to guard against the onslaught of “government men” (KS, 59) sent to police the land, he is resigned to the fate of the hills, and is “suddenly glad he’d had no sons. The responsibility of land would end with him” (KS, 67). After sucking the venom from the wounded man’s leg, William “felt momentarily glad that his grandfather and father were dead and unable to know that he’d helped the man live. His father would have left the man snake-bit, and his grandfather would have shot him” (KS, 68). William’s life-saving measures are not an indication of moral superiority over his father and grandfather; rather, they are a reluctant admittance of the demise of this once-isolated region. His forebears were proponents of an “us” versus “them” mentality, but William realises that he cannot protect the past from the future. Instead, he must create a new present, one that integrates the established traditions into a contemporary reality. William imagines that his daughters will produce sons, his grandsons, and thinks that if his “own grandson understood his decision” to save the coalman, “he’d give the rifle to the boy” (KS, 68). The future of Appalachia, Offutt implies, is located within a national consciousness; one must be aware of how times have changed, but equally, respectful of the history of this place.<sup>27</sup>

“House Raising” portrays two men, Mercer and Coe, as devotees of a strict code of ethics that the other men in this story are more reluctant to take on. Mercer is white, Coe is black, and the other men do not approve either of Coe’s presence on this day or of Mercer’s unapologetic acceptance of a black man. They are all gathered on a muddy hillside, attempting to tow a house trailer into position for

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<sup>27</sup> Offutt’s “future” is decidedly male-oriented, as evidenced not only by this story but by the remainder of Offutt’s work. The author’s intentional creation of a legacy for his own sons is reflected here, and perhaps most poignantly, in *The Good Brother*, where Virgil is preoccupied with the loss of his family name, his family’s future.

Mercer's brother. As the men stand on the hillside, sharing a bottle of whiskey, Mercer (the white man) takes a swallow after Coe (the black man). Earlier, when Mercer warned him to get himself a drink of whiskey before it was all drunk, that there might not be any left, Coe stated, "Not for me, anyhow" (KS, 24). And so, after Mercer follows Coe's drink with one of his own, Offutt writes that "the men stared, surprised that Mercer would drink after Coe" (KS, 28). Earlier, Offutt had deliberately presented Coe's ethics and delineated his moral values, *before* revealing his ethnicity. Mercer asks Coe about his previous job, and Coe describes his position as a vet's assistant on a horse farm, where he worked for six years. Coe's cousin died, though, and he "told the big boss I was going to the funeral and he said not to come back." Offutt offers, through Mercer, tacit approval of Coe's choice: "Got to stand by family ... Man like that ain't worth working for." Coe's response reveals his race, his awareness of his lowly social stature because of his race, and his acceptance of this facet of Appalachian culture. He says, simply, "Some people don't like niggers" (KS, 21).

After Bobby is injured, the men on this muddy hillside must re-examine their priorities, and the process by which Coe is allowed to minister to Bobby highlights the evolving nuances of Appalachian masculinity. Though Coe is aware of his position within this group (that is, on its fringe), his desire to help Bobby supersedes any fear he might have over asserting himself. He "shouldered through the men and knelt in the mud [next to Bobby]. He pressed his hand against the open wound." Bobby's father -- already portrayed as a staggering, one-eyed alcoholic without much sense -- is obvious in his insistence that a black man not aid his son; he yells at Coe: "Reach for him again and you'll draw back a nub!" When one of the other men adds in a "low and hard" tone, "watch what you're doing there," and "the others move to him," their menace is clear. Bobby's distress, however, is equally clear, and so the men look to Mr. Richards, the boss, for guidance. None of the men says anything, as

they know that “giving an order would mark him as uppity.” Mr. Richards’ decree is disappointingly ambivalent, as he notes merely that Coe “did work on a horse farm ... But I can’t say what all he knows” (KS, 29). As the other men rub their mouths and adjust their hats, sweating from the tension of the moment, Mercer steps forward with the belt Coe had requested, and “jingled the buckle.” His support of Coe’s efforts is apparent, and after carefully looking around to see if “the rest agreed, [the men] began nodding to one another” (KS, 30). They silently authorise Coe’s ministrations, and he proceeds to save Bobby’s life. In the end -- though after wasting precious moments in a largely silent debate over the permission for a black man to help a white man -- this group of men take the correct moral path, choosing Bobby’s life over their own prejudices.

In the end, however, the reader understands that although a small advancement was made in that instance, these men -- as representatives of Appalachian society -- have not relinquished their hold on the old biases. When Mercer asks his brother if he has seen Coe, Aaron says, “You mean the nigger?” Though Mercer replies, “No ... That’s not who I mean, you son of a bitch,” it is apparent that Coe, the man who has just saved a life in an extraordinary manner, is still merely a nameless black man in the eyes of this culture (KS, 31). Instead of being lauded for his success, Coe knows that if Bobby does not survive, his “name’ll come up. I got to get off this hill” (KS, 32). As much as Mercer is portrayed as a beacon of reason and fairness in this stultified culture where the hillbillies (marginalised themselves) claim superiority over other, supposedly inferior, groups, the ending of this story reminds the reader that change is slow to come. Further, the positioning of “House Raising” in *Kentucky Straight* (immediately following “Sawdust,” wherein Offutt argues strongly for the integral value of Appalachia) indicates that not all of the external ideologies that modernity has brought to this region are negative. “House Raising” thus functions as a reminder that although

insularity does much to protect the values and traditions of a culture, it can also be harmful.

Some of the strongest elements of “House Raising” centre around Offutt’s depiction of the easy camaraderie among Appalachian men; similar scenes have punctuated some of Chris Offutt’s very best work.<sup>28</sup> The nuances of conversation between men in a male-oriented society are something that this author understands perfectly; many of his most effectual passages allow homosocial relationships to act as the representation of core Kentucky values: the importance of friendship, honour, family, and history. The men of “House Raising” stand in a circle, passing around a bottle of bourbon. The men in a similar scene of *The Good Brother* stand in a circle, passing bourbon and insulting one another, as do the “Haldemaniacs” of *No Heroes*, those men with whom Offutt has shared a lifetime of friendship. There is no overt affection or sentimentality in these exchanges, but there is the alliance of commonality. In these circles, the men wait patiently for stories to reveal themselves; if they were curious, “they’d never ask but would wait instead, wait a month or a year ... Then they’d hear the truth, not a story tainted by the asking” (KS, 22). It is here that Offutt elucidates the crux of the debate over Appalachian literature: those outsiders who have attempted to offer a portrait of Appalachian life have their stories “tainted” by asking questions of a culture that can offer no desirable answers. The “truth” thus emerges as the natural emanation of a native’s own story, unmarred by the artificial fulfilment of a regional mythology.

Fenton, the protagonist of “Smokehouse,” acts as the benchmark against which the evolution of Appalachian homosocial culture is measured. He walks through the woods on a winter night to join a poker game hosted by his oldest friend, Catfish. Offutt notes that “Fenton had spent more time with [Catfish] than with his wife. They had mined together, hunted and fished year-round, and dragged each

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<sup>28</sup> See Appendix II for a more complete discussion of male camaraderie.

other home drunk in the old days” (KS, 95). Three other men are in attendance: W. Power, “a World War II veteran who raised hogs up Bobcat Hollow;” Connor, who had “been married and divorced three times, and now slept with other men’s wives ... once a month [he] went to Rocksalt with the purpose of going to jail;” and Duke, who had once been “arrested for defending his brother” and then “put in twenty-five years” in the army (KS, 95-96). Offutt’s descriptions of these men indicate that Connor is the miscreant, W. Power the elderly sage, Catfish and Fenton the mediators, and Duke the hardy Vietnam veteran. The dynamics of this group rely on both the men’s ages and the experiences that they have undergone. When the game starts, Connor jokingly insults Catfish, then “laughed until noticing that everyone was silent” (KS, 96). Connor, the youngest and the one with the most spurious moral past, is not entitled to tease the host, a message conveyed by the silence of the group.

Just as he does in “House Raising”, Offutt uses dialogue -- or, more specifically, the collective reaction to each other’s dialogue -- to reinforce the dynamic of the group. Connor loses the first game to Duke, who warns Connor not to start trouble, “his voice low. They stared at each other across the table” (KS, 97). The allegiance of the other men clearly lies with Duke: W. Power tells Connor that “if it weren’t for rheumatiz, arthritis, and outright pity for a tomcat, I’d black your eyes and send you home.” At this comment, “everyone laughed,” and Connor begins his descent into defensiveness and drunken obstinacy. Finally, in a misplaced attempt at saving face in front of the other men, Connor bets twenty dollars that he has the largest penis of the group. All the others decline, but Duke says, “maybe I got what you’re after ... I’ll take your bet” (KS, 101). The poker players understand that Connor’s manhood is at stake, but his “bluff had been called” and he has to prove himself. The philandering Connor unzips his pants but, without looking or revealing himself, Duke says, “You win ... I fold” (KS, 102). Connor’s bravado is deflated,

and his honour sorely compromised; he becomes even more determined to win the poker game (which Fenton eventually wins). After Connor storms out of the smokehouse, Duke claims, “All I lost was money ... I got all my teeth and nobody saw my wiener. I won what counted” (KS, 109). What he has won is dignity, and by implication, Connor has lost his. Offutt’s preoccupation with men displaying their genitalia to other men continues into *The Same River Twice*. There, he asserts that “men’s tendency to take an interest in one another’s genitals is not so much sexual as simply wondering how they stack up against everybody else” (SR, 101). Connor’s desire to see how he “stacked up” against Duke clearly outlines his insecurities among this group of hardened men and combat veterans, just as Duke’s refusal to drop his pants reinforces an obvious masculinity that needs no trivial bolstering.

After Connor storms out of the smokehouse, Fenton knows that the younger man (a Melungeon, Offutt feels compelled to emphasise) will seek revenge against Duke. This awareness precipitates an internal debate, one that demarcates a gradual shift (within Fenton’s lifetime) of Appalachian traditions. Fenton wonders if he “should warn Duke. He didn’t much care for him but nobody deserved a bushwhack. Telling him betrayed Connor, but it might also stop him from killing a man” (KS, 108). Fenton eventually warns Duke to “watch his chimney” -- i.e., to be wary of Connor’s vengeance -- but later, comes to realise that changing cultural values have left him a forty-four-year old man who does not know what to do anymore. He knows that “twenty years before he’d have waited with Connor [to ambush Duke]. Maybe in another twenty, he’d warn Duke straight out” (KS, 111-112). The implication, of course, is that the previous generation of Appalachians was still so firmly entrenched within their traditions of revenge and the protection of male honour that killing a man who had wronged another man at cards was hardly a moral dilemma. Now, enough of the old traditions persist that these men are no longer certain of the correct course of action in this situation. Though the men all agree that

Connor has been slighted, they have all grown weary of senseless violence. In the future, Fenton's realisation indicates, the decision *not* to exact revenge will be as simple as the decision *to* take revenge once was. Within Fenton's lifetime, he (as a representative of typical Appalachian men) has experienced the disruption of his culture and the growing awareness that the old facts of Appalachian masculine traditions cannot exist within a new context, and therefore cannot survive as new facts.

*Kentucky Straight* presents a version of Appalachia that is both recognisable to those outsiders who would take the stereotyping of *In the Tennessee Mountains* as fact, and to native Appalachians who struggle to maintain the best aspects of their culture while reconsidering the persistence of traditions that no longer seem logical in the contemporary climate. As its title suggests, *Kentucky Straight* offers a truthful portrayal of a culture that must perpetually defend itself against the twin invaders of stereotyping and modernity. As a native of this region, Offutt reflects his compulsion for accuracy within a text that refuses to claim that a sole portrait of Appalachia can encompass the wealth of diversity that exists there. Further, Offutt heralds a new future for Appalachian literature by insisting upon the universality of these "peculiar people" that occupy this "strange land." In *Kentucky Straight*, Offutt demonstrates the possibility of a literary rendering of this place that is at once recognisably Appalachian (and unique), and that reflects an experience similar to that of any other region in flux.



## Chapter 3

### Privileged Access: Constructed Memories and the Southern Autobiographical Impulse

In September of 2005, Oprah Winfrey selected James Frey's memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, for her Book Club, thereby ensuring its commercial success. Frey's book recounts his struggles with drug and alcohol abuse and his eventual recovery; it was billed as one man's triumph over adversity, and Frey was lauded as an inspiration for all addicts in America. In January of 2006, however, a Court TV-owned website, "The Smoking Gun," revealed that several key "factual" elements of *A Million Little Pieces* were, in reality, fictions. The furore that followed this revelation is remarkable not as a commentary on the divisive power of contemporary media, but as part of a larger debate about the function (or, more precisely, the intention) of autobiography. The deceived Oprah Winfrey led many other Americans in the charge against Frey, claiming that the real issue was the misappropriation of the term "memoir," and the supposedly concrete nature of truth. This debate, however, is not limited to the superficial arena of popular media; academic discourse is also divided, with some scholars equating truthful content with quality, and others adamantly insisting that all autobiography be viewed as fictive. What is not debatable, though, is the ever-increasing popularity of literary autobiography. *A Million Little Pieces* has as its bedfellows Mary Karr's *Liar's Club*, Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Augusten Burroughs' *Running With Scissors*, and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* -- all of which have experienced extremely high sales (especially in the United States), and prompt the question: What is it about our current cultural climate that makes autobiography so popular, and how has this obsession grown in the past several decades?

More pertinent to the purposes of this thesis is the corresponding increase in the production of autobiography by southern authors, forming a niche market within the existing subsection of literary nonfiction. Since Harry Crews' *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* was published in 1978, more than a dozen of southern literature's stalwarts have written (separately from their "fiction") memoirs of their lives in the South. However, these more artistically-driven autobiographies, though numerous, are far outweighed by the volume of memoirs capitalising on the quaintness of a southern existence. These sensationalist tales are replete with stereotypical images of racial intolerance and hillbillies -- or, equally, with magnolia blossoms and the unwavering honour of gentlemen. This chapter, and the following discussion of Chris Offutt's *The Same River Twice: A Memoir*, will investigate the autobiographical impulse in America's peripheral regions (in this case, the Appalachian South); the muddled concept of "truth" and its role (if any) in autobiography; and the history of this literary genre in America.

### **From the Life to the Self: Shifts in American Autobiography**

In his entry, "Autobiographical Impulse," written for the encyclopaedic *Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*, Bill Berry devotes much attention to the importance of Benjamin Franklin's work in the evolution of the genre of autobiography in America. Berry is the leading critic in the field of southern autobiography, and his inclusion of Franklin's autobiography situates his critical analysis squarely in alignment with his predecessors, James Olney and James M. Cox.<sup>29</sup> Unlike Olney or Cox, though, Berry

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<sup>29</sup> As one of the lone voices in southern autobiography, Bill Berry is generally viewed as an authority on the subject. However, his comments at times reflect the scarcity of this critical opinion, and fall victim to the sort of obtuse essentialising that has epitomised literary criticism of southern fiction throughout the twentieth century. Berry claims that "recent southern autobiography ... echoes the themes of earlier migrations: hope, ambition, optimistic self-assertiveness, curiosity and confusion ... nostalgia ... community, and ancient faiths that gave meaning and continuity to who the writers were and what they wanted" (Berry, 1997: 618). Berry is not *wrong*, of course, but his definition is so broad

recognises the disparate field of autobiography produced by native southerners, and his essay (published in 2002) attempts to explain the marked twentieth-century separation of southern autobiography from the more generalised national movement.

The principles espoused by Franklin in his 1793 *Autobiography* have come to symbolise not only the ideal of an individual, but of a nation. His themes -- “honesty, the success myth, the ideal of the self-made man, the belief in social progress” (Berry, 2002: 79) -- are interchangeable with the very notions that have come to epitomise American identity. Earlier autobiography tended to provide chronologies of famous figures, but Franklin’s *Autobiography* represents a departure from previous examples of autobiography. Instead of focusing merely on the achievements of the individual, Franklin and his successors emphasised the individual’s role within the context of a community. Franklin’s late eighteenth-century *Autobiography* and its ensuing creation of an American tradition coincided temporally and theoretically with the birth of the nation. Berry asserts that “American autobiography has exalted the individual as the end, measure, and symbol of the country, constitutive of community rather than the other way around” (2002: 78). This idea is firmly rooted in Franklin’s belief in the self-made man and endlessly repeated under the umbrella title of the American Dream. The individual’s perseverance, dedication, and -- most importantly -- collaboration with other individuals results in community; as such, the community (or the nation, or the region) cannot be credited with the creation of the individual. Furthermore, argues Robert Sayre in a 1980 essay entitled “Autobiography and the Making of America,” “American autobiographers have generally connected their own lives to the national life or to national ideas” (149). There has always existed in American autobiography a unique inclination towards universalising the experience of the individual, attempting to locate a life within a national or historical context.

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that it devalues a literary genre that appeals, very specifically, to the experiences of one group of people.

It is precisely this intersection of the self with national precepts that defines American autobiography, and more importantly, differentiates it as a national literature from its Old World counterparts. Georges Gusdorf, the French philosopher who forged a theoretical alliance with James Olney in the late 1970s, noted in 1956 that “the genre of autobiography seems limited in time and in space: it has not always existed nor does it exist everywhere” (28). Such an observation thus necessarily roots autobiography within a cultural context, and relies on philosophical concepts for its theoretical explication: the autobiography is the manifestation of the self, but the self cannot exist autonomously and so must function within a community. The autobiography, by extension, is thus a reflection of the self’s interaction with a community. The implications of such ideas are manifold: autobiography functions as the barometer of social and cultural expression; autobiography, as personal narrative, is the accessible companion to historical texts; or American autobiography is the microcosmic representation of the nation. To elevate autobiography from the realm of the personal to the political imbues it with a significance it had previously lacked. The opportunity for American autobiographers to use this literary form as a method of personal expression thus competes with the responsibility of sympathetic political reflection.

James Olney, editor of *The Southern Review* since 1983 and professor at Louisiana State University, has been credited with the “discovery” of autobiography as a literary genre. The evolution from autobiography as a simple expression of an individual’s life towards autobiography as a literary, creative form had been the focus of Olney’s research in the 1970s; he published *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* in 1980. In the introduction to this text, Olney dissects the nature of the term “autobiography” in order to identify its relatively recent progression into a literary genre. “Autobiography” (wherein *autos* is the “self,” *bios* is the “life;” and

*graphie* is the act of “writing”) has gradually evolved from an emphasis on the life (the *bios*) to a focus on the self (the *autos*). Olney argues that, before the shift,

there had been a rather naïve threefold assumption about the writing of an autobiography: first, that the *bios* of autobiography could only signify “the course of a lifetime” or at least a significant portion of a lifetime; second, that the autobiographer could narrate his life in a manner at least approaching an objective historical account and make of that internal subject a text existing in the external world; and third, that there was nothing problematical about the *autos*, no agonizing questions of identity, self-definition, self-existence, or self-deception -- at least none the reader need attend to. (20)

Olney’s conception of the naïve, traditional form of autobiography -- strict adherence to a chronology, objectivity, and avoidance of any crises of self -- provides direct contrast with contemporary autobiography. What had previously been determinants of value or success have been wholly contradicted by modern autobiography’s flagrant abuse of traditional precepts. Olney argues that autobiography’s focal switch, from the *bios* to the *autos*, is “largely responsible for opening things up and turning them in a philosophical, psychological, and literary direction” (19), and the methods by which autobiography is evaluated have evolved commensurately. Autobiography’s previous value, as the representation of a life, was bounded by the corollary limitations of the author’s experiences. By refocusing the autobiography onto the *autos*, however, the genre melded more gracefully into the American conception of the individual’s creation of a community. Olney writes that the *autos* is the “psychic configuration of the individual at the moment of writing, the whole history of a people living in this individual autobiographer” (19). The release of autobiography from the recounting of a life to the observance of a self invites, implicitly, the examination of the community that is bound up in that self. Olney does not assign a chronology to this transformation, but the resulting product is very much a contemporary phenomenon. Bill Berry notes in his 1997 essay that “the American road runs endlessly through the evolving self” (614); American

autobiography's twinned fascinations with the self and with national politics both differentiate this genre from its international relatives and ensure its influential position as a expansive form of literary expression.

A further iteration of American autobiography is its contemporary role as an avenue by which marginalised people can assume an authentic voice that both legitimises and locates their experiences within the larger society. Julia Swindells, in her 1985 book, *Victorian Writing and Working Women*, astutely notes that

autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness -- women, black people, working-class people -- have more than begun to assert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a 'personal' voice, which speaks beyond itself. (7)

This idea, of an individual voice speaking 'beyond itself,' is integral to the identity of American autobiography. The memoir that assimilates political content with personal recollection creates a significance that is impossible to achieve through the narrowed lens of the story of a single life. The autobiographer's desire to integrate their *bios* with a broader cause will be examined more thoroughly in the later context of autobiographical impulse, but at this juncture an examination of the *effects* of an autobiography that asserts the identity of a peripheral group is essential.

Bill Berry claims that, in writing memoirs that assume the voice of a marginalised group, "autobiographers seek or demand admission for themselves and, by implication, others like them" (1997: 617). For the peripheral group to "demand admission" necessarily implies that the central culture is the governing body to which all other cultures are refused entry, and further, that these marginalised cultures *want* to be accepted into the central culture. How, though, does autobiography legitimise the voice of the silenced? In a later essay, Berry notes that "autobiography had perhaps always been the most profoundly American form of

social criticism” (2002: 81); the genre’s ability to criticise American culture lies in its fluid concepts of memory and freedom. The autobiography that is not enslaved by the limitations of memory is the literary embodiment of the American Dream. Berry writes that “if America represents infinite possibility, then memory is almost un-American ... a collective and individual freedom from memory may be the most American freedom of all” (1997: 624). A logical extension of literary autobiography’s castigation of the stultifying nature of rote memory also identifies its ability to transcend the limitations of marginal groups. America’s downtrodden people, characteristically limited by their exclusion from the national literature, find in autobiography the ability to reject such borders. People are empowered through the simple act of representation; indeed, autobiography is “never more seductive ... than when it asserts the self’s oneness with the reader and some shared story of the country” (Berry, 1997: 611).<sup>30</sup> Autobiography -- and the allure of intimacy -- is at its most powerful (and political) when that intimacy is used to bridge the gap between the mainstream and the peripheral. James Olney writes that autobiography “offers a privileged access to an experience ... that no other variety of writing can offer” (13); the personal amplification of the political is at its most resonant when it gives voice to the subversive or the disadvantaged (who have gone largely unheard in a national, literary arena).

The South thus emerges as the logical partner of American autobiography, although as recently as 1991, James Olney argued that “there is no southern autobiographical tradition” (Olney, in Humphries, 134). More specifically, Olney claimed that there was no autobiographical tradition for white southerners, although black southerners have long used autobiography as a means of expressing and uniting their experiences.<sup>31</sup> Timothy Adams claims in his entry to *The Companion to*

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<sup>30</sup> This recalls Offutt’s delight in discovering his Appalachian dialect within the texts of Gurney Norman and James Still.

<sup>31</sup> This chapter will only address the question of autobiography written by white southerners. Black southerners’ success within the autobiographical genre is well-documented and concrete, but as this serves as a companion piece to Chris Offutt’s *The Same River Twice*, a southern memoir written by a

*Southern Literature* that the South's late espousal of the autobiographical genre is surprising, given the typically southern literary themes of the past and memory. The disconnect, then, between what Julia Swindells asserted -- that autobiography is the ideal medium of marginalised cultures -- and James Olney's claim that there is no southern autobiographical tradition may be explained by recognising disparate cultural identities of the South. Though centralised Americans may view the South as the Other, white southerners have historically maintained an elevated status in their own cultural hierarchy, above their African-American brethren. White southerners of the twentieth century thus felt they could not claim marginal status as long as their subjugation of black southerners remained fresh in the national memory. Bill Berry writes that "white southerners born before the 1970s have generally felt that they have a lot of explaining to do" (2002: 81); after this period, however, a shift, from a backward cultural theoretic to an awareness of social culpability, gave white southerners the impetus to experiment with the reality of autobiography. Southern writers, in the final third of the last century, frequently produced memoirs that attempted to reconcile the glorious idealisations of a southern existence with guilt-ridden recollections of racial injustices.

The most contemporary instance of southern autobiography, however, reconstructs southern cultural identity to include the expansive range of white experience, and to recognise the role the South plays in the nation's imagination. Bill Berry graphically describes the South as the "apostate brother who stains the sheets of our *e pluribus unum* bed" (2002: 80). However, while such a description is arguably sensational, it reinforces the white South's newfound identity at the frays of mainstream American society. Recent southern autobiography written by white authors no longer supports the uniformity of the white experience, but presents the divergence (and the denigration) of southern culture in a broader cultural context.

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white man, the exclusion of a discussion of black autobiography is necessary in the interests of salience and continuity.



Finally, white southerners can appropriate political autobiography in support of their own, newly-identified, marginal status.

Berry further equates white southerners' sense of guilt over the experiences of black southerners with a hallmark of southern autobiography: the exploration of childhood. Writing of childhood, he argues, "limits self-incrimination and allows writers to reconcile liberal principles with southern loyalties by showing the humanity of family and neighbours -- good people, accidental racists, it may seem, made so by the deep circumstances of time and place" (2002: 81). Such an explication, while perhaps overly forgiving of white responsibility, implicitly allows southern autobiographers (and indeed, all southerners) to extract the goodness from the white southern experience while denying or ignoring the debauched. The southern autobiographer's devotion to his or her childhood, Berry would argue, emanates not from a particular nostalgia for that period, but from a desire to place that experience in a vacuum. Childhood, then, acts as the great leveller: a white southern experience before one can reasonably be assigned responsibility and thus blame or guilt. "Adulthood," Bill Berry writes, "is anticlimax;" the "story" of autobiography, he contends, is the story of "becoming, or being, alone with others," and that story is self-contained in an author's childhood (1991: 8). The achievement of adulthood is thus viewed as the finale of the real southern story. Contemporary southern autobiography that focuses on the nostalgia of childhood effectively reinforces traditions of the white southern honour society and ignores the blight of inherent cultural racism.

American autobiography's preoccupation with the self's relationship to a larger community is transmuted, in southern autobiography, into a fixation with the intertwined concepts of family and place. As companion to the prevalence of the stories of childhood, "one can scarcely imagine a southern autobiography that did not emphasize family," and, just as American autobiographers have located themselves

within a national and historical context, “southern autobiographers ... have identified themselves in the context of families *and* communities. The self has been a social one, rather than an individual essence” (Berry, 2002: 79, italics mine). These notions stem from Berry’s earlier text, *Home Ground: Southern Autobiography* (1991), wherein he uses his title interchangeably with theoretical precepts of this genre. “Home ground,” he writes, “implies that a sense of family and a sense of place are wedded in southern autobiography,” and this relationship is reciprocal. Southern autobiography “explores place to discover family, family to find place, and both to ground a sense of self” (Berry, 1991: 7).

How then, does southern literary autobiography (or, indeed, any autobiography) differ from its fictional counterpart? Edward Ayers and Bradley Mittendorf, in their introduction to *The Oxford Book of the American South*, note that southern writing is “about memory, about imagining and reimagining the past” (x). Jack Butler, in his 1996 essay “Still Southern after All These Years,” asserts that in “all the authors of our grand canon, we think of five things: We think of a place; we think of the darkness and splendor of families; we think of a way of talking; we think of the Bible; and we think of black and white locked into a mutual if inharmonious fate” (35). Butler does not distinguish between fiction and autobiography in his encapsulation of the southern writer’s embedded subjects. The distinction between these two literary genres, then, is not subject matter. What differentiates autobiography from fiction is the elusive and yet unequivocal emphasis on truth -- which is to be separated from authenticity, or the questions of pedigree that arise in discussions of regional literature.<sup>32</sup>

### **Selective Memory<sup>33</sup>: The Autobiographical Impulse**

<sup>32</sup> Refer to Chapter 1, where it was noted that Appalachian literature written by non-natives is inherently valueless; in this instance, what is not “true” is equally inconsequential.

<sup>33</sup> In 1882, Ernest Renan wrote: “l’essence d’une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses” (the essence of a nation is that its members have lots in common ... but also that they have all forgotten many things) (892). Renan’s

James Olney's preoccupation with the etymology of the word, "autobiography," epitomises the debate over this field, much of which can be resolved semantically. Some scholars use the words "autobiography" and "memoir" interchangeably, as do indeed many authors. Occasionally, the rather flowery term, "life writing" is employed, but the summation of these terms all point backwards, to the root of not only the words but the impulse behind this genre. "Prior to the end of the eighteenth century," writes Michael Sprinker, "works that are today labelled autobiographies were known as confessions, memoirs, *journeaux intimes*" (325). Autobiography -- or confession, or memoir -- is the ultimate expression of ego; to assume not only that your story is of interest to others (that is, the story of the *autos* and the *bios*), much less that you are qualified to tell it (the *graphe*), requires an estimation of self-worth that is not always accurate. Laura Marcus, in 1994's *Auto/biographical Discourses*, contends that "the autobiography/memoirs distinction -- ostensibly formal and generic -- is bound up with a typological distinction between those human beings who are capable of self-reflection and those who are not" (21). Confessions or memoirs, then, are assigned a reputation inferior to that of the autobiography; memoirists are mere scribes, whereas autobiographers are artists.

The terminology for this section of literature has become increasingly blurred, though, to the point where "autobiography" is not confined to describing the creative remembering of one's past. Certainly, the spate of ghost-written celebrity tell-alls that use the term "autobiography" self-reflectively indicates that this distinction is largely academic, and no longer has real-world translation. Irrespective of sub-titular categorisation, though, the field of literary autobiography is similar to the egoism behind a celebrity "autobiography;" while the impulse behind autobiography remains constant, literary endeavours are marked by the "capability"

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words suggest that it is not *collective* memory that unifies a group; it is *selective* memory -- the forgetting as well as the remembering of specific moments or details.

that Marcus describes and an accurate estimation of that “capability” in the autobiographer.

The main purpose of autobiography is threefold: one, to create a version of oneself that is both appealing and permanent; two, to create and retell a history; and three, to speak for the oppressed and lend a voice to those previously silenced. “The autobiographer,” writes Bill Berry, “collapsing chronology, tracing pattern, establishing coherence ... clearly creates as much as records a self” (1997: 626). Berry’s contention -- that the artistry of the autobiographer allows an autobiography to be developed much like a work of fiction, with a central theme and without enslavement to temporal order -- assumes that the “self” that is created through autobiography is a self for an audience. The autobiographer skews biographical details in order to present a more pleasing character or story; indeed, “autobiography shares with fiction the requirement of having a beginning, middle, and an end” (Berry, 1997: 620).

James Olney’s assessment of the creation of a self, however, perceives the audience to be internal. It is through “the act or writing” (the *graphie*), he writes, “that the self and the life, complexly intertwined and entangled, take on a certain form, assume a particular shape and image, and endlessly reflect that image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors” (22). Olney’s perception of the catharsis of writing -- of closely examining the reciprocal relationship of self and life -- excludes notions of autobiography as Berry envisages. The “two mirrors” of the latter version of autobiography imply, necessarily, that the self is contained, and excluded from outside influences. The twinned notions of self -- a contrived self, or a fully actualised self derived from reflection -- echo Gusdorf’s interpretation of Jules Lequier’s often-bastardised pious phrase, “Thou hast created me creator of myself.” Gusdorf, however, rewrites Lequier’s formula as “To create and in creating be created;” Gusdorf advances the original sentiment by adding the element of

*creativity* to the process of creation.<sup>34</sup> Lequier's idea -- that man possesses control over his self -- lends itself well to autobiography, which asserts that it is the very *act* of creating that gives man control over his self. Autobiography thus functions both as a means through which the public can access the private, but also the agent for the self's discovery of itself.

Georges Gusdorf combines these dualistic ideals, and advances them by aligning the self with history and anthropology. "The author of an autobiography," he writes, "gives himself the job of narrating his own history; what he sets out to do is to reassemble the scattered elements of his individual life and to regroup them in a comprehensive sketch." This act, of rewriting one's history, parallels neatly with Berry's notions of self -- that is, in rewriting one's history, there is a necessary editing of self. Gusdorf goes on to say, however, that "the historian of himself wishes to produce his own portrait, but while the painter captures only a moment of external appearance, the autobiographer strains toward a complete and coherent expression of his entire destiny" (35). This "complete and coherent expression" also echoes Berry's prescription for fiction -- that it have a beginning, middle, and end. Regardless of intention, though, autobiography's transformation into a self-portrayal of one's own character -- as opposed to earlier forms of autobiography that emphasised a life -- marks also the recategorisation of autobiography as a literary genre.

The second autobiographical impulse emanates from this newfound ability to create a self and transmute it from imagination to the page. If a self can be modified (whether for improvement or in the interest of coherence), why, then, can history not also be adapted and made better? Autobiography's foray into literature accompanied a new belief in history as a fluid concept. Gusdorf writes of autobiography as painting a portrait of its author "not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and

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<sup>34</sup> Arguably, Gusdorf's later iteration of Lequier's phrase could be attributable to a simple translation error; whether an issue of translation or intent, Gusdorf's inclusion of the importance of the creative process raises interesting ideas about the essence of autobiography.

wishes himself to be and have been” (45). The representation of history in autobiography is thus equally susceptible to the same sort of editing as the self; history, after all, is not a certainty but an amalgam of opinions and perspectives.

Additionally, “the man who takes the trouble to tell of himself knows that the present differs from the past and that it will not be repeated in the future ... he believes it a useful and valuable thing to fix his own image so that he can be certain it will not disappear” (Gusdorf, 30). To “fix” one’s own image can be interpreted in the restorative sense, where an autobiographer presents a composite of his best features; it can also be taken to mean, though, to “fix” in place, to make permanent what is most at risk of being forgotten. Through the act of writing, an autobiographer ensures, to a greater or lesser degree, that the story of one’s life will not be lost; the autobiographer, through his craft, is controlling the permanence of his history. The futuristic implication of autobiography -- that that which is written down cannot easily become obsolete (*pace* George Orwell’s *1984*) -- has as its companion the rearward-looking glance of the autobiographer, who is equally concerned with the trajectory of his life’s story. “Memoirs are always,” Gusdorf writes, “to a certain degree, a revenge on history” (36). The autobiography thus enables the autobiographer to simultaneously rewrite his personal history whilst ensuring that his historical position -- in a broader sense -- remains firm.

The final common autobiographical impulse is, as previously discussed, the desire to lend an authoritative voice to a marginalised group. However, an autobiographer’s inclination to represent a larger group of people (in order to validate their existence or not) is, much like the impulses concerning the self and history, decidedly arrogant. Gusdorf writes that “the man who takes delight in thus drawing his own image believes himself worthy of a special interest” (29). The autobiographer who broadens his own experiences, additionally, to include those of an entire group is not merely believing himself “worthy of a special interest” but is

also assuming that he is qualified to accurately represent the lives of others. “In some tangled, obscure, shifting, and ungraspable way [autobiography] is, or stands in for, or memorializes, or replaces, or makes something else of someone’s life,” writes James Olney, and in doing so, encapsulates the very nature of autobiography (24). The autobiographer who attempts to provide a representative voice is also attempting to “make something” of a life beyond their own. Some authors, notes Bill Berry, “recognize the egoism and attempt to control it ... Or ... they generalize and identify themselves with some larger cause or principle” (1997: 610). Berry sets “egoism” in opposition against identification with a “larger cause,” but a more realistic conception of this autobiographical impulse recognises that the representation of the marginal requires a certain amount of faith in one’s abilities. If speaking of oneself can thus be understood to be a moderate exercise in self-indulgence, then assuming the voice of an entire group raises more serious suspicions of self-aggrandisement.

### **If I Did It: Fact and Fiction in Autobiography**

The concepts of “truth” and “honesty” shifted in the latter decades of twentieth-century western society, in the sense that westerners now feel a sense of entitlement to both.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the infrastructure is now in place to actually provide access to that which had previously been limited. One need only witness the O.J. Simpson trial or the Bill Clinton/ Monica Lewinsky scandal of the 1990s to realise that the public not only feels that they have a legitimate claim over others’ private lives, but also that such information is constantly scrutinised for truthfulness. James

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<sup>35</sup> It would be difficult to quantify exactly *why* contemporary westerners feel such an entitlement, and often “demand” “the truth” – but I offer two lay hypotheses in explanation. Perhaps the secrecy-enshrouded political environment of the 1960s and 1970s in America succeeded in destroying any previous faith in government and institutions; or perhaps the technological advancements that have equipped citizens with the ability to investigate most any event or theory from a wide variety of sources and angles have led to a more generalised search for the increasingly elusive concepts of “fact” and “truth”. Regardless, “truth” and “honesty” have become skewed to the point that their once trusted ambassadors are now constantly susceptible to scrutiny.

Frey, author of *A Million Little Pieces*, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, originally intended for his book to be published as fiction, but the publishers demurred, in favour of capitalising on the current fascination with “fact.” “Truth” -- or at least the impression of it -- has become the most sought-after currency of contemporary American culture.<sup>36</sup> In his 1980 essay for James Olney’s *Autobiography*, Michael Sprinker discusses the famous “Paul is dead” incident of the 1960s, when rumours circulated that Beatle Paul McCartney had died, and been replaced by a look-alike and sound-alike. Sprinker writes that “American popular culture underwent a minor crisis,” as Americans felt overwhelmingly deceived. However, Sprinker further states that the “crisis” died down after a few months, “probably because “Paul McCartney” had long since ceased to have any significance as an individual and had become ... simply a face and voice” (322). What, then, do Bill Clinton or O.J. Simpson have to do with the study of autobiography (aside from the fact that Clinton has written two of his own -- *My Life* (2004) and *Giving* (2007) -- and Simpson published *If I Did It* in 2007)? The transformation of autobiography from a pure “confession” of the experiences of the author’s life to a cohesive, purposeful literary genre has clouded the delineation of “fact” (the old autobiographical style) and “fiction” (the new, wherein the author retains control over precisely what he confesses). Berry notes in his 1997 essay that as the self was “created,” “the distinction between reality and image, fact and fiction, eroded and diminished in value, the one transmuting into the other” (613). The irony, of course, is that in a culture that seems to value truth, its manifestations of “truth” are often deceptive and regularly imaginative. The appearance of truth has replaced the need for actual fact.

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<sup>36</sup> Perhaps this national demand for “truth” can be attributed to a corresponding sense of entitlement. Contemporary culture instructs Americans not only to work hard for their dreams, but that the Dream is part of their birthright. In the frenetic quest for the “best” (of everything), the currency of truth must be understood evaluatively: “truths” are better than “lies,” and thus we feel entitled to the reward of those truths.



Bill Berry further writes that “quite a few critics dismiss the question of factuality. For them the distinction between fiction and autobiography is arbitrary and largely irrelevant;” his reference to such critics as “them” or “they” linguistically and dogmatically excludes him from that group (621). Berry somewhat sarcastically presents the argument that “they” put forth to legitimate the newly fictionalised autobiographical genre, that all autobiography “is art, good or bad,” and that “the autobiographer selects details, deploys symbols, develops or discards “characters” in accordance with his theme, purpose, and overall design” (621). According to “them,” autobiography is reduced to little more than a “story;” after all, “the reader demands story” and thus the autobiographer “must tell” one (621). Georges Gusdorf also brings up the artistic impulse of the autobiographer, stating that “we may call it fiction or fraud, but its artistic value is real” (43). Surely, then, if the artistry is equal, the distinction between autobiography and fiction lies somewhere in the supposedly truthful nature of the former. Literary critics (like Olney) argue convincingly, though, that the self (the supposed purveyor of “truth”) is always present in fiction. The only real discrepancy, it seems, between autobiography and fiction is the manner in which the self is presented: critics of James Frey were not upset that his work contained half-truths; they were upset because they had been led to *believe* that they were reading whole truths. Linda Anderson writes that “intention ... is ... defined as a particular kind of ‘honest’ intention which then guarantees the ‘truth’ of the writing” (2-3); for an author to make a “guarantee” of truth, though, requires faith not only in the author’s honesty but in the abstract concept of “truth” in general. The reader must not only believe that authors are capable of telling the “truth,” but also that they are devoted to transmitting that truth to their readers. Certainly, writes Olney, “behind every work of literature ... there is an “I” informing the whole and making its presence felt at every critical point” (21). The “I” in fiction is thus implicit, while in autobiography it is tacit. How must we view fiction? Autobiography? Must we

assume that all autobiography is fiction, or must we assume that all fiction is autobiographical? In the contemporary climate of artistically-driven autobiographies, is there any value in retaining the title of “autobiography”?

### **Franklin’s (Un)Intentional Legacy: Southern Autobiography and its Progenitors**

The most cursory examination of southern autobiography reveals its chronology to be empirical evidence of a cultural and literary shift. Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain -- a southerner before one’s ‘southernness’ became an important cultural distinction -- produced autobiographies; Franklin’s *Autobiography* (1793), as discussed earlier in this chapter, serves as the original American autobiography, and Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), generally considered to be highly autobiographical, is a national classic. In the first half of the twentieth century, only a handful of southerners wrote autobiographies, with all of the most important ones appearing in the 1940s. Richard Wright and Lillian Smith (with *Black Boy* (1945) and *Killers of the Dream* (1949), respectively) were among the first writers to tell of the personal impact of racism on their lives. In a letter to Wright, William Faulkner wrote of *Black Boy* that “it needed to be said and you said it well” (Cox, quoted in Olney, 20); this is the essence of the impulse to speak for and of a marginalised people -- to write, well, out of necessity. William Alexander Percy’s *Lanterns on the Levee* (1941) memorialises the decline of the southern aristocracy and is thus a contemporaneous accounting of the transformation of his culture and of his personal history.

The 1960s and early 1970s saw a lapse in the field of southern autobiography (with the exception of Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969)), but Harry Crews’ 1978 publication, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*,

reintroduced southerners to autobiography, and autobiography to southerners. Enough time had passed, in 1978, from the Civil Rights conflict of the previous decade to allow white southerners to write stories of their selves, without necessarily being consumed by questions of race and guilt. Furthermore, Harry Crews demonstrated that there are many Souths, and that autobiography -- free from the restrictions of a fictional genre that only accepted southern stereotype as authentic -- was a prime avenue for the demonstration of this variance. Crews' experiences in rural Georgia might be declassified in fiction as portraying a South unknown to the larger nation, but the author's use of the autobiographical format legitimised and authenticated his southernness.

And yet, it was not until the 1990s that southern autobiography exploded both in productivity and popularity in the broader market. Acclaimed writers like Reynolds Price and Mary Lee Settle began to reveal their lives to readers, and there developed a trend among young, male (and generally white) southern authors to produce their own versions of their truths. Tim McLaurin (born 1954) and Chris Offutt (born 1958) have interspersed fiction with literary autobiography, paralleling the contemporary conflation of political media and human-interest stories. These writers have used autobiography to add another dimension to the spectrum of their work, further emphasising the impossibility of removing autobiography from fiction and artistic license from autobiography. It would seem that as long as the cachet of "truth" remains, there will also persist the distinction between autobiography and fiction -- though the work of contemporary authors (like Offutt) calls into question the necessity of that distinction.

The following chapter will focus on Chris Offutt's first memoir, *The Same River Twice*, and the author's purposeful creation of a legacy. This section will highlight Offutt's integration of the three main purposes of autobiography (to create a permanent, appealing version of oneself; to create a history; and to speak for the

marginalised), as well as his arduous journey towards the realisation of his artistic calling. It is apparent that Offutt's physical travels throughout America and his emotional journey towards adulthood and fatherhood have informed his desire to recreate his history in a lasting and significant manner. *The Same River Twice* -- and later, *No Heroes* -- are emblematic of Offutt's search for the certainty and perpetuity of a recorded life.

## Chapter 4

### Half of What I Know: The Autobiographical Impulse in *The Same River Twice*

In his 1975 autobiography, Roland Barthes writes that “this book is not a book of ‘confessions’; not that it is insincere, but ... we have a different knowledge today than yesterday ... [and] such knowledge can be summarized as follows: What I write about myself is never *the last word*” (120). Ironically, Barthes is perhaps best known for his essay, “The Death of the Author” (1967), in which he equates the presence of an author with a limiting of the text. To remove the influence of the author, he contends, is to liberate a text from the tyranny of that author’s experiences. Such comments become problematic when applied to autobiography: twentieth-century literary criticism would inexorably separate the author from the work, but what are we to make, then, of memoir, wherein the “I” *is* the text? Barthes, it has been noted, is “famous for contradictory reasons,” and it seems that he delights in the confusion of contradiction (Culler, quoted in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*). To simultaneously argue that the author should be subsumed by the text, and then resolutely identify himself as an author -- *the* author, in fact, of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, the title of which intrinsically contradicts this structuralist’s denigration of the authorial “I” -- speaks to the complexity of critical thought in the genre of literary autobiography. Barthes’ note about his own autobiography raises two crucial points that permeate any discussion of contemporary memoir: that the very word, “memoir” no longer connotes ‘truth’ or ‘authenticity’ in previous works, and all autobiography must be viewed merely as a conjoining of the author’s memories and his artistry; and that the autobiographical “I” is a fluid notion, quite separate from the authorial self.

Chris Offutt's first memoir, *The Same River Twice*, was published in 1993, following the success of his debut collection of short stories, *Kentucky Straight* (1992). The chronology of this volume alternates between the past and the present; the past centres upon Offutt's departure from Kentucky (aged nineteen) and subsequent journey throughout the United States, and the present is set in Iowa, where Offutt and his wife, Rita, await the birth of their first child. The content of this memoir echoes the theoretical precepts of literary autobiography: Olney's vision of the exploration of the self (the *autos*); Swindells' employment of the autobiography as a voice for a marginalised culture; the traditional telling of the *bios*, the story of one's life; and Gusdorf's "fixing" the permanence of a personal history.

Offutt uses the act of *graphe* -- the writing of this memoir -- not merely to "attain a knowable self," as Franklin Burroughs has stated, but to "make" a self, borrowing from Lequier's notion: "To create, and in creating be created." *The Same River Twice* emphasises Offutt's reliance on the safety of the woods as the inspiration for his *graphe*, combining the traditionally pastoral elements of southern literature with the postmodern "need to establish the authenticity of the self" (Berry, 2002: 82). Offutt further employs the political potency of autobiography as a platform for his ongoing advocacy of the integrity of Appalachia; *The Same River Twice*'s references to the blighted reputation of Offutt's home region again address its shortcomings and assert its value. The lengthy passages in which Offutt reveals his decade-long adventure away from Kentucky contextualise the underlying 'story' of this memoir -- that is, the story of Offutt becoming a writer. Ultimately, though, the summation of Offutt's autobiographical impulses leads to his desire to "fix" his history, to create a legacy that will outlive his corporeal existence. Bill Berry writes, simply, in his 1997 essay: "Autobiography's forever" (609). *The Same River Twice* is Offutt's opus, his attempt at solidifying the elusive concept of 'forever' by providing a tangible

expression of his self and his life, in a form that will guarantee the permanence of his created legacy.

The autobiographical voice enables Offutt to direct the formation of this legacy and retain control over the form of that bequest. Franklin Burroughs, in a 1994 essay concerning *The Same River Twice* and written for the *Southern Review*, calls Offutt “anthropologist to his own aborigine;” here, Burroughs saliently identifies the temporal complexities of memoir that Barthes had also described. *The Same River Twice*, written by Offutt in his mid-thirties, integrates Barthes’ conception of the impossibility of ‘the last word,’ and forces the reader to recognise that this is not merely a reflective memoir but a premonition of Offutt’s future. Polymath Paul Valéry separates the ‘instant’ in which an autobiography is written, and the future, to which the author is privy but of which the reader is ignorant. He writes of biography: “I don’t know if anyone has ever ... attempted at each instant of it to know as little of the following moment as the hero of the work knew himself at the corresponding instant of his career. This would be to restore chance in each instant, rather than putting together a series that admits a neat summary” (quoted in Olney, 349). Offutt (or the biographer of his self, the *autos*) intersperses the present tense -- those sections in which he is contemplating the impending birth of his first son -- and the past tense, wherein he recounts his travels throughout the United States and his twenties. In doing so, he transforms the chronology of the typical memoir, combining the present and the past and inviting the reader to look forward, in opposition to other memoirs’ rearward glance. Burroughs, in terming Offutt both anthropologist and aborigine, appoints him simultaneously the investigator of a history and the history itself. As he is “collapsing chronology” (Berry, 1997: 626), Offutt is trying -- in Valéry’s words -- to “know as little of the following moment” as the reader can, including that reader in his journey towards self-discovery and further, through the creation of a permanent legacy.

Chris Offutt takes the title of his first memoir from the words of Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher who once said, “You can’t step into the same river twice.”<sup>37</sup> Offutt thinks of these words while standing in the river near his Iowa home, realising that “the water surrounding one leg is not the same as around the other leg. Sediment drifts away and it occurs to me that you can’t even step on the same bank twice. Each footstep alters the earth” (SR, 54). All of man’s ‘footsteps’ make an impression on his external world, however minute, and man must be both aware of his effect and responsible for it. By choosing to take a step, man chooses to leave behind vestiges of his self, and subtly alter the environment of that footstep. Offutt’s consciousness of an individual’s power to change history underscores the narrative of *The Same River Twice*; the author is aware that if he wishes to impress himself upon the swirling inconstancy of history’s river, he must imprint his foot and stake a claim. This memoir is his attempt at altering his environment, and creating a lasting legacy of that impression.

### **Conferring Meaning: Offutt’s Creation of History**

Georges Gusdorf writes that the autobiographer “believes it a useful and valuable thing to fix his own image so that he can be certain it will not disappear like all things in this world” (30). *The Same River Twice* reveals not only the story of the author’s belated transition into adulthood, but his intrinsic desire to, simply, make his mark on the world. The physical text of *The Same River Twice* is a simultaneous culmination of that desire, and an explication of itself. The reader will recognise Offutt’s travels throughout the United States as the search for an appropriate medium through which the author can leave a lasting impression. The story of *The Same*

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<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Cratylus, an elder contemporary of Plato (ca. 428-348BC) and a disciple of Heraclitus, extended his master’s doctrine and said: “One cannot step into the same river even once;” the river is a relentless engine of shift and change (Muller-Merbach, 170).



*River Twice* is the story of Offutt's belief both in the merit of his personal history and his ability to recount that history, and this memoir is the manifestation of that belief.

Before he recognises that the route to establishing his legacy is through writing, Offutt tries to join the army, thinking it an appropriately respected venue for the creation of a memorable history -- but is denied entrance into its ranks. Later, Offutt dabbles in a variety of artistic enterprises, hoping to transcend the confinement of the personal via an aesthetic contribution to an artistic canon. Offutt's final (albeit grudging) attempt to "fix" his own image is his ultimate decision to become a father. These three, seemingly disconnected acts contribute to a reflection of a memoirist whose desire for legacy motivates each of his life's choices. James Olney writes that the goal of the memoir is "to secure the self and its reality by attaching it irrevocably to history -- its own history and the making of history" (21). This intersection -- of personal and collective histories -- is, Offutt recognises, the only way to make an individual's history permanent. *The Same River Twice*, then, is about irrevocably attaching the history of Chris Offutt to a broader, external history. He writes, of his own life, that it is the "life of a barnacle: temporary attachment to a larger object" (SR, 59); the summation of Offutt's actions is a perpetual attempt to imbue his self and his life with permanence. The author recognises the surety of a collective history, and further, that to affix his life to that broader history is to ensure his own legacy. The prologue to this memoir is the author's homage to history; at its conclusion, he writes: "I should be a rock sculptor, carving a mighty pantheon to rival the debris we left on the moon" (SR, 10). Offutt's purposeful self-affiliation with the architects of world history indicates a belief in the eventual realisation of his goal of permanence and significance. He writes "I should," demonstrating fealty to his aspirations; his memoir is his rock sculpture, carved from the rough mass of his life's experiences as compensation for his decade of seemingly aimless wanderings.

The first of these three catalytic events -- Offutt's rejection from the army (and other similar episodes) -- is compounded in its significance by the author's persistent focus on traditional expressions of masculinity. Offutt has written very little from a female perspective, but terms such an exercise "an act of liberty. [It would be] very freeing to ... not feel I have to represent my gender" (Grant, 2002).<sup>38</sup> Indeed, all of Offutt's work has been intensely masculine; the female characters are largely incidental or supportive, and the male characters all subscribe to more or less traditional patterns of behaviour. Of his tiny community in eastern Kentucky, Offutt writes that the future was entirely gender-based: "Girls went to college seeking a husband; boys went to work" (SR, 20). Offutt's later travels indicate his characteristically tumultuous relationship with steady work, and so, when an army recruiter comes into the pool hall which the author had been patronising since his retirement from high school, Offutt is "ripe" for enlistment (SR, 20). Offutt writes that the "mountain culture" (to which he belongs) "expects its males to undergo various rites of manhood, but genuine tribulation under fire no longer exists" (SR, 20).

In a later passage, Offutt aligns the "maladies" of men from the western United States with those of Appalachian men. They, too, "are deprived of the old outlets, but stuck with the need to live up to their heritage" (SR, 71). Their heritage, of course, is that of unquestionable masculinity; the author hopes enrolment in the army to be sufficient replacement for non-institutional demonstrations of masculine behaviour. In the place of "genuine tribulation under fire," the army will test and hence confirm Offutt's masculine status. Most importantly, though, joining the army will elevate Offutt from the realm of the personal and the detached (his life in remote Kentucky) into the collective. "Joining" the army really means, to Offutt, becoming

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<sup>38</sup> Offutt's forthcoming collection of short stories, *Luck*, remains firmly situated in Appalachia but is told from the perspective of one woman at various stages in her life.

part of something larger than himself, and part of something larger than eastern Kentucky can offer. This is Offutt's first attempt at creating an enduring legacy.

Unfortunately, when Offutt goes to Lexington for the army's physical examination, the doctor refuses him, on the grounds that he has albumin in his urine. He writes that he "felt weak" and cried: "My own body had trapped me in the hills" (SR, 21). Offutt's first step towards solidifying his future has faltered; he has failed in his goal of becoming part of a larger collective. Subsequently, he applies (and is denied entrance) to every available organisation that groups men together in intense physical situations to test their tenacity, skill, and strength: the Peace Corps, the park rangers, the fire fighters, and the police force. His primary reaction to the failed auditions for membership in these masculine organisations, though, is distinctly *unmasculine*. He recalls that he "didn't know which was worse, the shame of physical betrayal or the humiliation of having cried in front of a hundred eager men-to-be" (SR, 21).

Clearly, Offutt's use of the phrase "men-to-be" indicates that he feels that inclusion in the army's ranks would solidify one's status as a man; now that he will never be part of that brotherhood, not only is his masculinity dubious, but the opportunity to join an existing American institution is no longer available. The other men at the physical exam moved away from Offutt "to hide their own embarrassment," and his impression of the day is that he would "never know camaraderie, or test myself in sanctioned ways against other men" (SR, 21). The author's choice of phrase here belies his inwardly controversial debate over his unconfirmed masculinity. He writes of "sanctioned ways," indicating a rooted belief in the viability of established systems for asserting or denying masculinity. These "sanctioned ways" -- Offutt's first attempt at attaching himself to a collective history -- are forever beyond his reach, simply because of physical deficiency. The very environment that has fostered Offutt's vision of his own gendered identity summarily

dismisses him from eligibility in those “sanctioned” ranks, and quells his early goals of historical permanence.

After Offutt’s rejection from established brotherhoods, he leaves Kentucky and begins rambling the country, searching for an artistic occupation to which he can devote himself fully. He believes firmly in his own artistic abilities, but he is unsure of the appropriate outlet for his aesthetic energies. At various points in the narrative of *The Same River Twice*, Offutt envisages himself as a poet, a sculptor, a painter, and a playwright. He is in constant contact with his journal, though he continually dismisses his “diligent journal entries” as not being “real writing” (SR, 13). The irony, of course, is that Offutt’s country-wide search for a creative outlet has been with him the entire journey, “buttoned inside [his] shirt” (SR, 59).

He equates artistic success with everlasting reknown, believing himself capable of achieving a level of originality and brilliance that would quash the efforts of his artistic predecessors. In California, Offutt spends his nights in a homeless shelter, but his days on the beach, sketching scenes and then “signing and dating each sketch, and leaving them in front of the scene I’d sketched.” He imagines an “art dealer tracking my passage, saving every drawing,” a dealer who would “eventually contact me with an offer of studio space and supplies if I’d translate my brilliant studies into paintings” (SR, 85). His delusions of talent, however, are dashed when a well-dressed man finds one of his sketches on the beach, then “wadded the paper and dropped it in a garbage can.” Instead of recognising Offutt’s self-ascribed “brilliance,” the man says, “Jesus ... Now I’ll have to wash my fucking hands. You bums are bad enough without leaving your trash around” (SR, 86). After this incident, however, Offutt does not lose sight of his desire for artistic fortune; he merely looks for another venue through which he can achieve his goals. He decides to become a playwright, and thinks that this profession “would be easy. Plays were nothing but talk, and I’d write down every word I overheard, then weld them

together” (SR, 86). Offutt calls play-writing his “true ambition,” and imagines himself writing a “single script that would not only eliminate the need for more but nullify the prevailing theater. One play would mortar my manhood into a wall” (SR, 115). His first notion -- that one fantastic play would relieve him from the pressure of penning any more -- only seems reasonable as companion to his next, grandiose idea: he imagines himself writing a play so remarkable that all other plays will pale comparatively. Offutt’s visions of artistic success seem equally preoccupied by naiveté and optimism; he continually anticipates the wondrousness of achievement without considering the arduous process accompanying creativity. What is most important to note about this statement, though, is its final sentence: Offutt believes that a single play will “mortar” his “manhood into a wall.” Just as he imagined that membership in the armed forces would solidify his masculine identity, Offutt is certain that his creative triumph -- and all its attached connotations of value, worthiness, and achievement -- will bring an unshakable union with his gender. Offutt’s definition of masculinity does not exclude participation in the arts, but it does demand the honour of success. That Offutt chooses to use the imagery of mortaring and walls not only contributes to the inherent masculinity of the statement (using a construction motif -- as in, physically building a structure), but also bolsters his unwavering desire for permanence. The play that he will write will be his barnacle, through which he will attach himself (using bricks and mortar) to the “larger object”: the solidity of the artistic canon. Offutt’s search for an artistic venture is an extended attempt to attach his self (through art) to the permanence of a collective history.

Offutt’s final foray into procuring a legacy for himself succeeds on two levels: the birth of his son will be a literal contribution to his heritage, while simultaneously providing inspiration for *The Same River Twice* and the permanence a memoir will bring. While living in Massachusetts, Offutt meets his future wife, Rita,

who becomes the catalyst in securing Offutt's legacy: with her encouragement and financial support, he finally decides to write prose; and with her persuasion, he agrees to become a parent. Indeed, marrying Rita is Offutt's first step toward the actualisation of his goals. Marriage, he writes, "is something full-fledged adults did" (SR, 120), and his marriage is an indication that his years of aimless wandering and fruitless searching have come to an end. Contemporaneously with his meeting Rita, Offutt begins to see that after all those hours of facing his typewriter, trying to create a play or a poem, he only has a stack of blank pages and a mind like a "tornado" as evidence of his efforts (SR, 146). He finally realises that these artistic ventures are not going to yield the fantastic results he craves, and so, just as he was "ripe" for the army recruiter, so he is ripe for yet another change in direction. For the first time, though, Offutt chooses a direction that has the capability of taking him forward in a concrete manner, instead of merely providing the illusion of progress.

Several years later, at the time the reader enters the narrative, Offutt is happily married to Rita, though she desperately wants to include a baby in their partnership. Offutt concedes that he has always wanted children, but his years of transience have deprived him of the stability that he feels is necessary to have a child, and tells Rita that this "was the wrong time" (SR, 13). The author also admits that he is fearful about his parental capabilities, but then finally realises that "the decision was remarkably simple": he can have a "life alone without her, or a life with Rita and a child" (SR, 14). The Offutts begin trying to conceive, thus enacting another scheme to secure the author's legacy. Soon, though, "after a winter ... with no fecundity," Offutt begins to doubt his potency; he "worried that [his] army was composed of lazy draftees" (SR, 15). The author might have failed to meet the qualifications for the United States' army, but in producing a son, he uses his own personal army to construct a new soldier through which his history will become permanent. To fail in this manner, after having failed for over a decade, consumes

Offutt's thoughts, and his anxiety is only partially assuaged when Rita actually does become pregnant. Then, the magnitude of conception's possibilities overtakes Offutt, who at once feels like he is the "first man to father a child" (SR, 18) but also that he is entering into the most essential of all natural cycles. He writes: "I felt like Zeus field-testing his swan suit before the seduction of Leda. Gamete met zygote. DNA merged into the corkscrew that resembled the Milky Way's spiral, Hermes' Staff, the swift helix of infant birth" (SR, 16). At the moment of his son's conception, Offutt is joining the ranks of nature's army in the fight against becoming obsolete. A child will "mortar his manhood" into a wall more surely than a play or a poem ever could; in becoming a father, Offutt is imbuing the future with a very tangible expression of his self. Further, in writing a memoir about this bestowment of self, Offutt is demanding that the process by which he will be remembered is also made permanent, thus doubly ensuring his legacy.

### **Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now: *Wanderjahre* as Memoir**

In his essay, "Landscapes of the Alternate Self" (1994), Franklin Burroughs describes Chris Offutt's ten years of travel as his *wanderjahre* (literally, "years of travel," from the German). This journey is Offutt's contribution to the traditional form of autobiography, wherein the author simply relates the experiences of his life. However, the manner in which he relates such a collection of experiences is decidedly non-traditional, in several important ways. Primarily, an author's memoir (or at the least, his first memoir) generally focuses on the story of his childhood. This is especially true of southern autobiography,<sup>39</sup> but Offutt chooses not to reveal the details of his own childhood, instead advancing his narrative to begin at the age of nineteen, as he is about to embark on this extended American journey. Further, the

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<sup>39</sup> For example, the autobiographies of Eudora Welty, Harry Crews, Rick Bragg, William Alexander Percy, or Dorothy Allison.

author's postmodernist internal discussions about the craft of writing indicates that these anecdotes are not a simple re-telling of history, but are instead contrivances, executed in order to provide fodder for the author's journals. Offutt has not come to the end of his life and realised that his experiences would make for an interesting literary biography; at the time of writing *The Same River Twice*, he is in his thirties, and his life is structured around the creation of experiences about which he can then write. The narrative of *The Same River Twice* is therefore not a traditional act of *bios*, such as James Olney described; it is the story of Chris Offutt becoming a writer.

The question of Offutt's conspicuous avoidance of his childhood as a literary subject may seem relatable to a discussion of the author's troubled relationship with his father. To argue, however, that Offutt does not write of his childhood because he is unwilling to revisit the tumult of his familial relationships is simply too neat, and ignores the overarching conception of Offutt as a conscious artist, a writer determined to create a lasting legacy. Such an argument necessitates a vision of Offutt as a man and his memoir as the psychological textbook of that man; responsible criticism ignores such a thesis and demands that Offutt's memoirs be construed as the manifestations of artistic vision.

Southern theorists could also argue, inversely, that Offutt's avoidance of childhood issues is indicative of yet another troubled relationship -- this time, the guilt-ridden relationship of a white man to black southerners. Rote southern autobiography, in the last half-century or so, includes many memoirs written by white southerners (literary or otherwise) that represent the broad spectrum of southern experience. The constant, however, is that nearly all of these autobiographies focus on the childhood of the author; this focus is described (by Bill Berry, predominantly) as a method of avoiding the collective guilt that accompanies the maturation of most white southerners.<sup>40</sup> However, Offutt indicates that eastern

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<sup>40</sup> In the accompanying chapter on memoir, it was established that "guilt" in this context refers to a white southerner's sense of responsibility towards black southerners; the guilt is always racially-focused.



Kentucky during his childhood was an environment devoid of racial variety. His first encounter with a black person occurred at the age of twelve, and the author's subsequent references to people of colour indicate not an aversion but a simple divergence of paths. Virgil, of *The Good Brother*, first goes to Lexington as an adult, following the death of his brother. In a store, he sees "several black people," but "tried not to stare;" he had never "seen any before" (84). And so, Bill Berry's theory -- that white southerners concentrate on their guilt-free childhoods as a means of excluding themselves from the culpability of societal racism -- inversely supports Offutt's singular focus on his adulthood: he had no childhood contact with African Americans, and thus no sense of guilt as an adult. In his memoirs, he does not need to retreat to the safety of his childhood in order to escape the burden of white southern responsibility. However, inasmuch as two entirely disconnected theories can support one another, Berry's assertions of racial consciousness have little to do with Offutt's neglect of the story of his childhood.

Why, then, is Chris Offutt so reluctant to write of his childhood? And, further, how does this omission inform the rest of his work? What statement is Offutt making, in choosing the genre of memoir as a literary form but eschewing the customary methodology of that form? The explanation lies in the marriage of Bill Berry's conception of adulthood, with Offutt's notions of himself and his contribution to memoir as a literary form. "Adulthood," Berry notes, "is anticlimax" (1991: 8), and the childhood-centred works of such southerners as Harry Crews and Mary Lee Settle support such a hypothesis. The real action, it is implied, occurs in childhood, during which important things happen and after which there is nothing new to learn. The memoirs of Chris Offutt, however -- *The Same River Twice* and *No Heroes: A Memoir of Coming Home*, are conspicuous by their avoidance of the author's youth, and offer only occasional childhood anecdotes, none of which resonates with the nostalgia of Offutt's contemporaries. This omission is especially

prominent in *The Same River Twice*, as Offutt contemplates the birth of his first son. Such an event would naturally invite reflection of one's own childhood, but Offutt chooses not to relate any of his memories. Estimation of the author's unwillingness to write of his childhood lies in the reader's perception of what, exactly, Offutt's childhood consists of, and further, what *The Same River Twice* is about. I would argue that this memoir is essentially the story of Chris Offutt becoming a writer; his childhood, therefore, is not his actual, chronological childhood, but his progression from the infant stages of writing towards full adulthood (the publication of *The Same River Twice* and *Kentucky Straight*).

Nearing the end of this memoir, Offutt writes that "for a decade my motto had been 'Always Forward'" (SR, 175); forward, that is, towards the often imperceptible goal of becoming a writer. In that decade, after Offutt leaves Kentucky but before finally settling in Iowa, he lives the nomadic life of an adventurer, continually searching for a location -- or an endeavour or an occupation -- in which he can find permanence. Along the way, Offutt's adventures veer towards the fantastical: he joins the circus and dons a walrus suit to fool the crowds; he gallops on horseback through Prospect Park with a Jamaican voodoo priestess; and he braves sharks and tropical storms in the Florida Everglades. None of these experiences, however, is authentic at its most basic level. Offutt's obsessive journal-keeping had begun in response to the "write what you know" principle, but he "did not believe I knew anything worthwhile. The only thing I could write with any confidence was a considered record of daily events" (SR, 36). Offutt's devotion to the artistry of writing in his journal, though, spurred him to seek out more exciting daily events. Better events resulted in better journal entries (or so his thought process went), eventually causing Offutt to enter into his own, microcosmic fact/fiction dichotomy. The journal, Offutt notes, "was proof that I existed in the present. As an event unfolded around me, I was already anticipating how I'd write about it later" (SR, 98). Here, Offutt is maintaining

the accepted chronology of non-fiction writing: first, an event must occur, and then it can be written about. Soon, though, the author's

adherence to the journal slid into a strange realm where I viewed my immediate interactions as a form of living diary. If riding a bicycle through a snowstorm sounded like good material for the journal, I borrowed a bike in a blizzard ...What I did was try to observe myself as carefully as possible, while simultaneously imagining myself writing everything down later. (SR 115)

Offutt's perspective has shifted: he is now creating fictions in order to write "fact." His "memoir" is not based strictly on memories, but on journal entries of his own contrivances. In a convoluted manner, these contrivances cannot be viewed as mere fictions, because they do comprise the experiences of Offutt's life. The fictive events -- engineered by Offutt for artistic gain -- are themselves components of his *bios*, his life's story. Related retrospectively, and including (as Offutt does) the process by which he created these fictions, the memoir becomes not merely a falsified narrative of fabricated events, but an account of Offutt's artistic methodology. The author's growing desire to conjure sensational life experiences -- as chronicled in *The Same River Twice* -- is tantamount to his progression as a writer.

Equally, it is this progression that provides a more reasonable explanation for Offutt's neglect of the commonly accepted form of southern memoir. He *does*, in fact, write about his own version of a southern childhood, but that childhood begins for Offutt at the age of nineteen, upon leaving Kentucky for the first time. In his infancy, he goes to New York and has his first lessons in life: he learns to distinguish people of different races; he meets homosexuals and transvestites for the first time; he discovers sex; he learns how to support himself financially; and -- most importantly -- he begins to obsessively record all that he sees in the journal he always carries with him. As his travels progress, so, slowly, does his maturation. By the time of his brother's wedding, while Offutt is living in Massachusetts, he admits that he is

“still struggling through a prolonged adolescence” (SR, 120), and unready for the responsibilities of full adulthood. As Offutt writes this memoir, and begins to garner some success with his writing, however, he realises that his now-fruitful commitment to this profession is the culmination of his artistic gestation. He writes: “My youth was behind me, not misspent exactly, but squandered to a certain extent” (SR, 13); Offutt’s lengthy search for the appropriate artistic outlet is time “not misspent exactly,” but derivative to the ultimate occupation. *The Same River Twice* -- the actual, tangible, physical object that is this memoir -- is proof of Offutt’s omnipresent but unconscious goal: to create a legacy that will outlast his life. Offutt the professional writer is Offutt, an adult.

### **The Subject of Countless Doctoral Theses: *The Same River Twice* and the Question of Appalachia**

Underscoring each narrative of *The Same River Twice* is Offutt’s resolute allegiance to his home in eastern Kentucky and the region of Appalachia. *Kentucky Straight*’s implicit political message decrying the unjust perception of Appalachians becomes more pronounced in *The Same River Twice*: Offutt is able to convey his personal conflict with his home region while vociferously defending its culture. Julia Swindells, discussed earlier in this chapter’s companion piece on memoir, extends the work of feminist critics of autobiography, who not only recognise the omnipresence of white men in this field but also the politically volatile effects of decentralising their presence. She notes the “potential” for autobiography “to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced;” she further writes that “people in a position of powerlessness ... have begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a ‘personal’ voice, which speaks beyond itself”

(7). It is Swindells' last idea (if a rather obtuse one) of the personal voice speaking beyond itself that is at the centre of contemporary autobiography's popularity.

Bill Berry refers to this usage of the personal voice as the hope that "the singular "I" on the page will grip the distant plural "you" (1997: 610), wherein the plural "you" is both the marginalised group and the mainstream culture. The degree to which autobiography has, in the past several decades, become a powerful vehicle through which individuals -- professional writers or otherwise -- can offer their life's experiences to a broad audience, however, is bound up in both Swindells' notion of a single voice, speaking beyond itself, and Linda Anderson's "guarantee" of truth. Anderson writes that autobiography assumes an "'honest' intention which then guarantees the 'truth' of the writing" (2-3); the contemporary obsession with 'truth' thus necessarily assigns credibility to an 'honest,' autobiographical missive, wherein the author (the "I") is defending the downtrodden. This area of critical thought is decidedly arbitrary, and frequently controversial: to declare that one narrative is more truthful than another is to assign a poignancy and resonance that is impossible to calibrate. What is certain, though, is that there exists an unscholarly American obsession with 'truth,' which is coupled with an assignation of value. For Chris Offutt, then, memoir affords him the opportunity to speak candidly of his experiences with Appalachia and Appalachian-ness; the genre through which he chooses to relate those experiences bestows upon them an imagined credibility that fiction cannot.

Offutt immediately establishes his Appalachian pedigree at the beginning of *The Same River Twice*: "I was born and raised on a ridge in Eastern Kentucky," he writes, "in the middle of the Daniel Boone National Forest" (SR, 12). Offutt's obsession with Daniel Boone emerges later on in the memoir, but it is important for the reader to first understand that although the narrative takes place in Iowa, the author -- and his thoughts and his memories -- are products of his home region. Offutt is vocal in his rebuke of Appalachian stereotyping, but even after several years

in Iowa, his description of that state lacks intimacy and therefore, authenticity: “Iowans wrestle, read, play miniature golf, and fly scale model aircraft ... Farmers have used the land so long that the richest soil in the nation is just old dirt, requiring a variety of chemicals that stay in the earth” (SR, 11-12). Even without the ensuing paragraph describing Offutt’s provenance, the reader is aware that the author is as much of a foreigner to Iowa as a VISTA worker is to Appalachia. Offutt’s sensitivity to the inaccuracies of a region’s cultural reputation is exclusive to Appalachia, a focus that implicitly suggests that legitimacy is an integral component in the defence of a marginalised culture. Offutt writes of the inaccuracies perpetuated in wider America’s vision of Appalachia, and of the great divide between outsiders and natives. He uses “us,” “our,” and “we” in direct contrast with “them” and “they,” and asserts that

Our hills are the most isolated area of America, the subject of countless doctoral theses. It’s an odd sensation to read about yourself as counterpart to the aborigine or Eskimo. If VISTA wasn’t bothering us, some clown was running around the hills with a tape recorder. Strangers told us we spoke Elizabethan English, that we were contemporary ancestors to everyone else. (SR 19)

Offutt’s ridicule of the “clowns” and “strangers” who have attempted to intellectualise the existence of this group of people is followed, throughout the narrative of *The Same River Twice*, by assertions of the Appalachian culture that are authenticated by their author’s pedigree. For example, Offutt writes of this region’s complex and “unspoken code of ethics,” and the “frontier mentality” of this place, where hard-working women hold “the families tight.” Appalachia, he confesses, is “the only society that had ever tolerated me” (SR, 20).

Offutt’s references to Kentucky are interspersed throughout his tale of *wanderjahre*, where his encounters with the oddities of wider America invite comparison with Appalachian culture. Offutt meets a group of Puerto Rican women

in a New York City laundromat, leading him to notice that “my culture had much in common with the Latin -- loyalty to a family that was often large, respect for the elderly and for children, a sharp delineation between genders. The men were governed by a sense of machismo similar to that which ruled in the hills” (SR, 25). Offutt does not align Appalachia with the American mainstream, but instead valorises the marginal, affirming group identity and refusing to apologise for cultural idiosyncrasies. Autobiography, writes Berry, “furnishes answers to the question, ‘How shall I live?’” (1997: 610); Offutt’s defence of Appalachia clearly encourages its natives to live proudly. His self-assigned role of guardianship of the Appalachian culture must, however, be examined contextually. In *The Same River Twice*, a memoir devoted to the creation and preservation of a legacy, what can be gained from Offutt’s advent of a new cultural heritage? Perhaps a goal of this memoir is to further restructure the ideology of Appalachia, just as contemporary literature presents a reconstructed vision of the South. In Offutt’s Appalachia, as in the wider South, the core entity remains, but its mythology is growing increasingly authentic as its architects strive to eradicate the old hurts of stereotype and falsification.

### **The Trees Know Me: Nature and Self -Discovery**

James Olney views the “critical turn toward autobiography as literature” as the “shift of attention from *bios* to *autos* -- from the life to the self;” literary autobiography must be primarily concerned with the “agonizing questions of identity, self-definition, self-existence, or self-deception” (19, 20). *The Same River Twice* is a literary autobiography that encompasses both the *bios* and the *autos*, but the *bios* is punctuated at every step by dilemmas of the *autos*. It is Offutt’s crisis of identity, after all, that leads him on his journey out of Kentucky early on in the narrative, and his varied uncertainties form the core of this memoir. Offutt asks himself, Am I

qualified to be a father? Can I make a life for myself in Kentucky? Do I belong in Appalachia? Should I be a professional writer? Can I repair the relationship with my father? *The Same River Twice* does not claim to provide answers to these questions, but finality is not the goal of this memoir. Bill Berry writes that a good autobiography is “the story that moves toward some realization or, rarely, renunciation of ideal” (1997: 616), and *The Same River Twice*, in between tales of the circus or the Everglades, constantly and therapeutically moves Offutt towards self-realizations (though rarely conclusions) and ever-changing concepts of the ideal. What is consistent, though, is the site of his contemplations: the Kentucky woods, or, in lieu of those woods, the riverbank near Offutt’s house in Iowa. Sharon Cameron, in a 1985 book examining Henry Thoreau’s *Walden*, asserts that “to write about nature is to write about how the mind sees nature, and something about how the mind sees itself” (44). The meditative connotations of Offutt’s relationship with nature thus satisfy Olney’s conception of the *autos* in contemporary literary autobiography: the woods function as the medium through which the memoirist can access his self.

Early on in *The Same River Twice*, Offutt writes of the woods: “I visit them every day. The trees know me, the riverbank accepts my path” (SR, 18). Further on, the author notes that “the wilderness accepts me as an extension of itself, an arm that knows its hand” (SR, 178). Most salient is Offutt’s use of the word “accept.” Whether such acceptance is real or not is irrelevant -- what is vital is the author’s *perception* of such an acceptance. It is here, in Offutt’s first memoir, that his relationship with the woods begins to take shape. For him, the woods provide many comforts -- solace, understanding, familiarity -- but none is so important as the assurance that within the confines of his own woods, he will suffer no crisis of identity, no worry that he will not fit in. In the woods, Offutt is merely Offutt, making the relationship between man and nature pure at the most elemental level: what is gained is a clarity of self, and what is lost -- happily -- is the confusion of the



outside world. Offutt writes often of the “tow” (SR, 110) and the “strange pull” (SR, 36) of the woods; as an adult, he is drawn to the one place in which he felt secure as a child. In *No Heroes*, he reveals that he leaves a folding camp chair in the woods near his Kentucky home, so that he can sit, undisturbed, and write. The woods are Offutt’s room of his own, allowing him to see his life reflected in the overarching cyclicity of the natural environment. Offutt’s compression of chronology in *The Same River Twice* assumes greater significance as the reader begins to understand the vital role of nature in Offutt’s life: the concept of time becomes insignificant, giving way to the surety of seasons, of birth and death. Offutt ventures in the woods to contemplate his presence, reconstruct his past, and -- most importantly -- to understand the direction of his future.

Offutt’s son is conceived in “a clump of shadowed oaks in the park” (SR, 16), an event that precipitates a heightened degree of uncertainty and mental stress for the author. He writes of the “toxic voyage” that his life has been, but he tempers that toxicity, through beginning “each day by entering the woods along the river” (SR, 18). Thrown into turmoil by his wife’s pregnancy, Offutt retreats to the woods, looking for answers to each day’s questions. Offutt’s paragraph structure supports his reliance on the woods’ ability to resolve and diminish his internal issues: first, he makes observations about nature and what he witnesses in the woods, and then follows those findings with a contemplation of his own life and Rita’s pregnancy. “Decades of DDT have weakened the eggshells of eagles until a female can kill her young merely by warming the eggs,” he observes. “I am stricken by a sudden fear that Rita will fall out of bed and crush the fetus” (SR, 133). Earlier, after Offutt writes of Heraclitus’ musings on rivers, he notes: “Wind in the high boughs makes the leaves ripple like water, producing a distant whisper. Fish eggs cling to rock along the shore.” Offutt begins the next paragraph by stating that “Rita’s eggs are thirty-four years old. She wanted amniocentesis to eliminate the worry of producing

a baby less than perfect” (SR, 55). In a later chapter, the focus of Offutt’s comparison between the woods and his outside life shifts slightly and becomes more refined. Although in earlier examples he merely jumped from writing about the woods (and latching on to a key word, like “egg”) to comparing his real life with his woodland findings, further on Offutt *expects* to be essentially similar to animals, and expresses regret when the evidence does not support this thesis. While considering exactly *why* he, as the father, must bear the role of responsibility for his wife and their son, he explains:

The mother bear will fight to the death for her cubs while her mate wanders the mountain. The female eagle is larger than the male, and in her passion can accidentally kill him during copulation. A buck deer think nothing of sending his harem forward as a decoy to ensure the safety of his travel. All this sounds good to me, but Rita and I are evolved. She is not a gatherer. I no longer hunt. The fact is, I’m home all the time, deep in my private cave, blowing red ochre onto blank pages. (SR 72)

Again, Offutt expresses the futility of his life, as he sees it through the lens of his rural Kentucky upbringing: he does nothing, and he makes nothing. His use of “the fact is” boils his craft down to its elements and removes any importance that could be associated with the creative. He is putting something that no longer exists (red ochre) onto nothing (blank pages). Offutt uses “evolved” sarcastically; his need to associate value with the concrete removes any possibility that an occupation that does not produce *something* is an advancement on one that does. In becoming a writer, he has not evolved into a man more accomplished than a hunter -- he has retreated to a “private cave” and reversed the process of evolution. Offutt’s placement of his self-directed observations in the same paragraph as his thoughts about nature (earlier, they appeared in different paragraphs) indicates the author’s increasing closeness with the woods. “All this sounds good to me” demonstrates his hope that his felt kinship with the animal kingdom will transfer into actuality; his

“but” carries with it the weight of disappointment that his imagined affinities are not real. The staccato nature of his sentences creates pauses in the paragraph, allowing the reader to contemplate more fully the intended meaning; the final sentence that resonates so strongly with dry actuality solidifies his descent from his dream world in the woods.

When Offutt and his wife finally decide to have a baby, he researches the most effective ways to get pregnant, and obviously plays an active role. After conception, though, his position is largely “superfluous, [like] a specialist who’d done his duty. There was so much focus on Rita that I became envious. Toward the end of each appointment, I’d invent some imaginary ailment to ask the doctor about” (SR, 17). Offutt’s feelings of exclusion are by no means original; the manifestation of those feelings, however, *is* unusual. He reveals a secret later on in the narrative: “There is an ancient maple in the woods, long dead but still upright, with a trunk the size of a small car. The tree is rotted, its guts hollow. At the base is an opening big enough to enter. I have taken to sitting inside this tree. No one knows I do this” (SR, 87). The maple tree becomes a surrogate womb for the author, an enclosure into which he can “crawl” (SR, 88) and ponder the monumental changes his life will soon see. At home, he is on the outside, separated from his wife and his son -- but in the woods, he has found a place where *he* can be the foetus. Inside the maple tree, he is protected from the world around him, and has a safe vantage point from which he can “peer into the woods unseen” (SR, 88). Offutt’s description of exiting the hollow tree solidifies the foetal image: “Leaving the maple is more difficult than entering. I lie on my back, brace my boots against the inner walls, and push myself faceup into the woods” (SR, 89). Offutt’s terror over the approaching birth of his son forces him to regress to the point of his own incubation, and re-examine his own existence. Every day, as he leaves the tree, he does not re-enter the world gently; instead, he forces his way, and comes out “faceup,” with a renewed sense of awareness and

readiness. Rita's pregnancy has made Offutt a passive participant in this facet of his personal legacy; his forays into the woods are his attempt at controlling his paranoia and actively becoming "better prepared" for fatherhood.

In her 1999 autobiography, *Clear Springs*, fellow Kentuckian Bobbie Ann Mason writes, "It has been a long journey from our little house into the wide world, and after that a long journey back home. Now I am beginning to see more clearly what I was looking for" (14). Mason's words echo the sentiment of *The Same River Twice*: its conclusion feels more like a beginning, as Offutt starts to recognise what he has truly been "looking for." His journey -- and not the aimless journey of his twenties -- has been both a journey away from something (in this case, his innate desire to put himself down on paper), and a journey back towards that same something. The journey, though, becomes Offutt's narrative, and in creating this, he is "forever adding himself to himself" (Gusdorf, 45). Bill Berry writes that "every man's life begins with the birth of his father. And the father's with that of his father, and on to the first of the line; until all the generations live together, each at once, father, son, and brother" (1991: 9). Offutt's psychological adulthood starts only with the birth of his son. As he walks in the Iowa woods with his newborn son, Offutt assures himself that "with courage and work, my son will become an adult one day;" startled, he then realises that "despite the obstacles" he has created for himself, he has finally "become [an adult] himself" (SR, 188). Offutt's adulthood is solidified by the knowledge that in ways both concrete and intangible, he has actively created a bifurcated heritage, one that will endure both in the pages of *The Same River Twice* and within his son. The conclusion of this memoir is the birth of the legacy of Chris Offutt.

## Chapter 5

### Fur Coats, or Foucault?<sup>41</sup> Southern Writers in the American West

Jack Burden, in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1945), declares, "When you don't like it where you are you always go west" (309). This assertion highlights several crucial facets of southern literature's relationship with the American West: that a fictional transition westward is precipitated by a dissatisfaction with the current location (the South), and that the West (as opposed to other American regions) is the destination of choice for displaced southerners.<sup>42</sup> Southern literature's real fascination with the West happened in tandem with a nation-wide obsession with all things western; after a lull spanning much of the twentieth century, there came a renewed focus on this region in the latter half of the 1980s, and it reached fever pitch by the early 1990s. For example, Joseph Hooper wrote in 1993 that "The West is a hot ticket now: Montana writers, adobe architecture, cowboy bars, the two-step ... Americans routinely go through periods of infatuation with the West, often after unsettled times" (*Harper's Bazaar*, August 1993).

Historically, the West had been the subject of works by displaced southerners such as Mark Twain and Willa Cather, but this region's literature remained inwardly focused until Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* was published in 1985. This initiated a new – and persistent – trend in southern literature, one that attempts to meld traditional southern concerns with the ideals and

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<sup>41</sup> From Blake Allmendinger's *Ten Most Wanted: The New Western Literature*. He writes that "western literature isn't exactly the most theorized field in the world. It's an un-p.c. region where people know more about fur coats than Foucault" (13).

<sup>42</sup> It is worthwhile to note here that for the purposes of this examination, the "West" will refer to Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. The US Census technically defines the West as also including California, Alaska, and Hawaii, but as the focus here is on the mythology of the legendary Old West, I have excluded the states whose imagery is markedly dissimilar.

the landscape of the West. Of *Blood Meridian*, Joseph Bryant writes that it is “a continuation of that restless urge to exploit the frontier which in the first half of the nineteenth century was still a significant part of the average southern psyche” (222). Bryant’s estimation of *Blood Meridian* -- that it maintains traditional components of southern literature, but situates those concerns within a new geographical framework -- finds purchase in Michael Johnson’s assertion that this novel “reads as if it had been composed through the agency of a sensibility some Western Frankenstein had concocted with traits from Hieronymus Bosch, Edward Abbey, Herman Melville, Flannery O’Connor, William Faulkner, Hunter Thompson, the late Texas novelist and poet R. G. Vliet, and God knows who else” (141). Such observations raise questions about the future of southern literature that are both exciting and frightening: indeed, to imbue southern writers with the sensibilities of other regions -- and, in turn, to have southern sensibilities applied to those places -- will produce a new wealth of literature, one that boasts a free-flowing exchange of cultural ideologies. Or, as more distrustful critics might suggest, does the addition of western ideas to southern precepts indicate the inevitable demise of regional individuality -- of a net loss of all that is unique about each place?

In the years since McCarthy’s innovative work of 1985, several southern writers have also turned West:<sup>43</sup> Richard Ford set a short story collection, *Rock Springs*, in Wyoming, and a later novel, *Wildlife*, in Montana; Barry Hannah’s *Never Die* (1991), Clyde Edgerton’s *Redeye* (1995), and Percival Everett’s *God’s Country* (1994) are all postmodern examinations of the West; Barbara Kingsolver directed the young heroine of *The Bean Trees* (1988) to Arizona; and Chris Offutt ventures west in three of his five books. What is it about the West that attracts southerners, and what specifically has attracted them in the last three or four decades of the twentieth

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<sup>43</sup> Doris Betts’ *Heading West* was actually published in 1981, but Betts is never credited with opening up the ‘frontier’ of the western landscape to southern authors, perhaps because her protagonist is female, and heads west only under duress -- i.e., Betts’ West is not the coveted landscape of later novels.

century? Three major phenomena connecting the South and the West offer some explanation: the existence of these cultures as constructed, mythological landscapes; the contemporary reassertion of a traditional masculinity and its perceived strongholds in the South and the West; and the function of place in accessing previous historical moments. This thesis will briefly examine each of these notions before situating Offutt within these contexts.

### **An Open Space of the Spirit: The Mythology of the West in the National Imagination**

Benedict Anderson is now well known for his notion of the imagined community, by which he does not mean an imaginary community, but one that exists within the imagination. Anderson writes that “communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but the style in which they are imagined;” the identity of a community is always a qualitative distinction rather than a quantitative one. Edward Said’s complementary theory of imagined geographies argues that the term “imagined” must be understood as a *perception*, rather than as falseness or baseless invention. Though these ideas were formulated as part of a theory of nationalism, they also have a broader applicability and can illustrate the American appropriation (and acceptance) of a specific mythology of the West. The West is the frontier, the untamed, rugged landscape unhindered by people, rules, or civilisation. The sensationalist accounts of the West that have become part of national mythology appeal to the elemental, to the will to survive independently and to overcome hardship, and to the belief that citizens are capable of self-governance. The Western cultural myth has historically and purposefully denied a need for law, religion, or even social interaction and idle conversation. It has also, of course, pushed women to the edges. The West portrays humans at their most basic, and leads outsiders to

believe that those daring enough to live there are unencumbered by the interference of American society. The most powerful connotation of the mythology of the West is the implicit promise that it can function as a landscape of renewal and, vitally, of “escape” (Limerick, 19). Gerald Kreyche argues that “the mythic West ... casts aside the unnecessary complications of life ... [in the West], everyone has an equal start. Justice is simple but effective. We all have the opportunity to start afresh” (273). The mythology of the West has traditionally been bound up with ideas of freedom, in many different forms.

This is the dominant idea of the West, and its imagery is pervasive, its iterations plentiful. Michael Johnson terms this region “an open space of the spirit, as much a mental as a geographical landscape,” then refers to that mental landscape as a sort of “virtual reality” (24). Indeed, protestations against this myth -- or “lies,” as Larry McMurtry refers to them -- tend to provoke an evaluative argument about the merit of mythology. Those who decry the mythology of the West -- particularly critics responding to the boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s -- claim that the actuality of the West scarcely resembles its romanticised image, and that there is little merit in blindly accepting the fictive portrayals of the region. Indeed, in a 2002 article published in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, John Cawelti disparages Kreyche’s earlier imagery of western “regeneration, simplicity, justice, and opportunity,” asserting that scholarly support for a western mythology should have receded long before Kreyche’s 1989 publication (136). Historians Michael Malone and Richard Etulain claim that “Wild West aficionados, like Civil War buffs, emphasized battles, bugles, and bullets and were more successful in conjuring up a mythical West for escapists than in advancing a real understanding of the place as it was and is” (174). Cawelti, Malone and Etulain, in their defence of the “real” West, tacitly argue that its accompanying mythology can be misleading as a means of identifying the essence of the region. Here it is worth reminding ourselves that



Anderson and Said's conception of "imagined" communities and geographies, however, contravene Cawelti *et al.*'s condemnation of mythology: the nationalistic categorisation of the West is concerned only with the *perception* of the West; "reality" loses resonance in the face of an established mythology, which in fact has stronger cultural presence.

Wallace Stegner, in his acclaimed collection of stories about living and writing in the West, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, accepts that "True or false, observant or blind, impartial or interested, factual or fanciful, [ideas about the West have] all gone into the hopper and influenced our understanding and response at least as much as first-hand acquaintance has" (48). Stegner's acceptance of the mythology of the West, and its unverifiable heritage, raises important issues surrounding the nature of an imagined reality. Richard Gray argues that when we watch a movie such as *Gone With the Wind*, there is an awareness of the film's historical and cultural inaccuracies (its counterfeit), but "we accept the counterfeit *as if it were true currency*" (2004: 10).<sup>44</sup> Such an argument can be applied to the myth of the West: even when presented with a reality that differs from the mythology, we remain convinced of the mythology's veracity. How can this be so? Perhaps the answer lies in extending Gray's metaphor a bit further: a counterfeit hundred-dollar bill is not, in fact, a real hundred-dollar bill -- but it will still buy a hundred dollars worth of goods. Using a counterfeit note creates an alternate reality, whereby fact and fiction are muddled, with no immediate consequence: the purchasing power of the fake remains true.<sup>45</sup>

An explanation of this phenomenon relies heavily on psychology, and makes the role of the believer -- the one who accepts the counterfeit bill -- vital. Johnson

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<sup>44</sup> This recalls Samuel Taylor Coleridge's original ideas about the suspension of disbelief, wherein the audience (or reader) is willing to accept sometimes far-fetched premises of works of fiction as true, in exchange for a period of entertainment.

<sup>45</sup> Though there would seem to be no punishment for imagining communities, the consequence of Offutt's imagining of Appalachia as an idealised community is his inability to be happy in any other place.

astutely writes that “myth tells its own truth about the teller. And about the believing listener” (92). In order to sustain their dreams of escape, those who believe in the mythology of the West *need* to believe in its fictions. Of Stegner’s 1972 novel, *Angle of Repose*, John Cawelti claims that its author “brilliantly suggests how the romanticized and mythic versions of the West were themselves more a response to the emotional needs and assumptions of Easterners than they were a realistic picture of the West” (138). Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* is credited with solidifying the genre of the “western;” its narrative is replete with images of independent cowboys and vigilante justice -- but Wister was himself an easterner, from Pennsylvania, and had only spent summers in the West for its healthy, dry climate.<sup>46</sup> *The Virginian* emanated from a conversation with Theodore Roosevelt; both men realised the potential of a novel that capitalised on Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 thesis attributing the core precepts of American national identity (democracy and individualism) to the existence and mastery of the western frontier. The very roots, then, of western literature are themselves a type of mythology, a reaction to a late nineteenth-century wave of nationalism and the American subscription to the cowboy ethos.

These people -- those desirous of this cowboy ideology -- “want a personal West, to whatever extent it may be mental, Walter Mittyish” (Johnson, 2). If the western mythology is a response to an obvious yearning, why are Cawelti, Malone, Etulain and others so disdainful of its existence? Surely the wishes of the nation supersede any dogged scholarly search for the “truth.” Certainly, Brian Dippie approves of one study of Billy the Kid *because* it “accepts myths and legends as facts” (132), and Richard White writes that “the actual West and the imagined West are engaged in a constant conversation; each influences the other ... so powerful is the influence of this imagined West that its fictional creations and personas become

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<sup>46</sup> Wister’s relationship with the West is little more authentic than Mary Noailles Murfree’s relationship with Appalachia -- both authors carved a literary reputation for themselves on the backs of stereotyped Others.

symbols of the West, and real westerners model themselves after fictional characters” (615, 614). Such confluence of fact and fiction -- creating an alternate reality -- is inherently dangerous, it would seem, as the opportunity for disproving the mythology is omnipresent. William Kittredge tells an anecdote of his grandfather, an authentic westerner, who scoffs, “Book people ... Nobody ever lived like that” (*Culturefront*, 55). Kittredge’s disdain for the perpetuation of the western mythology is evident in his assertion that the contemporary West is

like a shabby imitation of our cowboy dreams, a sad compromised place, used and abused, and used again. So many ... people ... feel deceived, and with good reason. They believed in promises implicit in the Western, that they had a right to a good life in this place, and it has become clear to them that it was all a major lie. (80)

This is the supposed danger of western mythology -- that the confrontation of myth with reality would be damaging to the precarious psyche of hopeful westerners. But this supposition neglects the original impulse of those looking westward, as espoused by Jack Burden of *All the King’s Men*: simply, people go West because they don’t like where they are -- and because they believe that a new, better life is waiting for them in the West. Critics suspicious of the western mythology are thus ignoring one of its vital components: the psychological make-up of those who believe in the myth. These would-be adventurers need the myth, and their unwavering belief in it contributes to its perpetuation. The western mythology is not so divorced from the reality of the West that none of its components are visible, and modern pioneers would inevitably find what they were looking for.<sup>47</sup> After all, argues Robert Murray Davis, “the Western mythos ... [is] not about power, which you impose on others, but about strength, which you find in yourself” (xii). The mythology of the West is

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<sup>47</sup> This idea recalls Klineberg’s Kernel of Truth hypothesis, in that sufficient “evidence” of the veracity of the legend remains, lending credence to its continued existence.

about finding a strength within oneself to create a version of the myth that coheres with a personal vision of fulfilment.

### **The Cowboy In Me: Searching for Old Masculinity in the New West**

In his 2001 review of Robert Brinkmeyer's earlier text linking southern writers with the West, Joseph Flora writes that "the subject of the western is always masculinity" (151). Flora's emphasis on the word 'always' echoes Jack Burden's desire to go West (when you don't like it where you are, you always go West), and illuminates an integral component of the western mythology. To head West in search of its proffered mysticism is to conduct a simultaneous search for a type of masculinity that has become extinct in other American regions. Catherine Himmelwright contends that "the West has become so 'masculinised' in connotation that the very word evokes images of the male" (121); more specifically, the male image that the West connotes is that of the cowboy, whose ideology serves as the model for American masculinity. Robert Brinkmeyer and Lee Clark Mitchell both discuss the "constructions of masculinity" (Brinkmeyer, 30) in the western; this construction -- like the western myth in general -- is a response to a late twentieth-century need for a disappearing national, masculine identity, which should in turn be considered a result of the political and cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s. American men go West in search of their inner cowboy, hoping the very atmosphere of the mythology's origins will nurture a sort of masculinity long subdued by efforts at political correctness.

Sociologist Michael Messner argues that "masculinity and femininity are not fixed, static 'roles' that individuals 'have,' but rather, they are dynamic relational processes;" the two genders "mutate in response to each other" (1993: 724, 723). Therefore, the second wave of feminism in the 1960s not only effected change for

American women, but the nation's men, as well. The rapidity with which American men -- the previous occupants of dominant social and political spheres -- were expected to embrace social change proved overwhelming; men were no longer sure of their own unique identity in the broader national consciousness. In an environment where women were gaining ideological (if not actual) equality, corresponding shifts in the type of masculinity men were expected to practice gained national attention in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>48</sup> By the mid-1980s, American men had passed through two stages of reaction to the upheaval of women's liberation: the first was an attempt to negotiate a culture that now -- theoretically -- emphasised the equal rights and self-sufficiency of women, while the second -- stemming from Robert Bly's "Iron John" and the mythopoetic movement -- produced many men who looked to the primitive as the source of their masculinity. The first reaction had men addressing previous imbalances by thrusting masculinity into traditionally feminine arenas, creating the "New Man," who was:

cheerfully self-confident in his masculinity; [he] likes to spend time with his children; [he] does not insist that his partner stays home or has a job of demonstrably inferior status to his own; he is non-competitive, gentle and caring; he even does his own shopping, washing and ironing, and is keen to impress his partner with the standard of his cooking. (Jackson, 206)

This reaction not only contravened 'traditional' forms of masculinity, but also misinterpreted the goals of feminism (i.e., the eradication of political issues particular to women); the New Man quickly became the Rare Man. Peter Jackson describes the New Man as 'the great pretender' (207), and suggests that supposed

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<sup>48</sup> Distinctions must be made here among the political, institutional, and personal implications of feminism: the *institutional* support of gender inequality has not been eradicated; women still only earn about 65 cents to the male dollar in the US (Messner, 1993: 727), and there has never been a female President or Vice President. The 2006 Gender Gap Index does not rate the United States in the top ten of nations with women in leadership positions. There is thus a need to "distinguish between the *presence*" of political movements and "the operating *power* they have won, which is often disappointingly small" (Connell, 613). The second wave of feminism doubtlessly made important advancements in the ideological conception of the American woman, but such advancements gained little purchase in the persistently male-dominated, *concrete*, spheres of industry and economy.

changes to masculine identity had been merely superficial. The traditional masculine ideal founded upon “war, hunting, and ordeals of various sorts” struggled to comply with the notion of the New Man (Donaldson, 6).

Opposition to the “New Man” prompted the second reaction to feminism, from men whose dismay at the identity that feminism would have them adopt compelled them to assume a masculinity extreme in its essentialism. Robert Bly’s *Iron John: A Book about Men* (1990) instructed modern men to take important lessons from ancient fairy tales and myths. Bly argued that gender behaviour is biologically determined, and that “the masculine voice” had been muted; men had become “passive ... tamed [and] domesticated” (Messner, 1993:729). According to Michael Messner, Bly’s *Iron John* was popular in the early 1990s not “because it represent[ed] any sort of radical break from ‘traditional masculinity’ but precisely because it [was] so congruent with shifts that [were] already taking place within current constructions of hegemonic masculinity” (1993: 729). Bly’s book appeared at the exact time in American cultural history when men were already retreating from the supposed pressures of feminism, and needed a focal point through which they could channel their impulses. Messner notes:

Masculinist responses to men’s fears of social feminization resulted in men’s creation of ... homosocial institutions in which adult men, separated from women, could engage in “masculine” activities, often centered around the development and celebration of physical strength, competition, and violence. Some of them ... were viewed as masculine returns to “nature” that they hoped would counterbalance the “feminising” effect of modern urban social life. (1997: 9)

Bly promoted just such engagement in “masculine” activities, leading popular workshops and retreats for men who wanted to rediscover their ‘innate’ masculinity. However, Robert Bly’s views have been criticised both for being overly simplistic and for lending credence to a large, regressive faction of men whose entrenched

gender identity gives little consideration to feminism's advancements. Bob Connell -- who wrote a popular criticism of Bly's work -- comments that "the fact that significant numbers of middle-class North American men are attracted to a view of masculinity which is nativist, separatist, homophobic, and expressed through concocted myths of ancient men's rituals, is a disturbing index of current sexual politics" (619).<sup>49</sup> Men in the 1990s wanted to free themselves from the oppression of feminism (Messner, 1997: 44), and turned to the primitive as a site of their vital manhood (Torgovnick, 160). Further, models of this essential maleness were sought in the peoples of tradition -- men whose gender identity was substantially derived from the physical and the biological, rather than the political.

"Yeeeeehaaah!" Michael Johnson asserts, is "a male utterance" (2). American men in search of a primitive masculinity need look no further than the West, to the land of the cowboy, "who combats evil by opposing villainous characters or institutions and who establishes (or reestablishes) order, frequently through violent, redeeming acts" (Etulain, 1996: 26). A journey westward indicates two truths: that the adventurer is looking *towards* something desirable, and *away* from something that is not. When what is desired is the cowboy lifestyle, the repellent factor is often what Blake Allmendinger calls "the feminizing influence of eastern society" (67). "Fiction explores men creating and destroying themselves in a West for the most part free from women and culture" (Brinkmeyer, 30); in this domestic environment, men have the opportunity to rediscover a version of themselves long hidden by the pressures of cultural equanimity. John Cawelti writes of Norman Maclean's semi-autobiographical novel, *A River Runs Through It* (1976), that it "evokes a lost world of skill with tools and heroic physical labour and shows how powerful an experience it was to be initiated into such a world" (140). Robert Brinkmeyer notes that the West is "an unenclosed world free from the nets of culture, a vast, wide-open space where

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<sup>49</sup> Connell has asserted perhaps the most striking rebuke of contemporary masculinity: in the 1990s, Bob Connell became Raewyn Connell, an Australian social scientist known for *her* work in gender studies, sociology, history, education, and political science.

a person survives the elements by acting elementally -- by instinct, bravery, and physical prowess” (28). The elements proposed by Cawelti and Brinkmeyer to be emblematic of a western lifestyle -- physical hardship, manual labour, necessary craftsmanship, and the bravery and honour necessitated by a difficult relationship with an isolated landscape -- were and are appealing to the American man in search of traditional masculinity. Jane Tompkins, in her 1992 work, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, describes the West as “secular, materialist, and antifeminist; it focuses on conflict in the public space, is obsessed by death, and worships the phallus” (28). The West, from its reputation as an unfettered, rugged territory, emerges as the ultimate retreat for a man searching for elemental masculinity. The Western, Tompkins theorises, “doesn’t have anything to do with the West as such. It isn’t about the encounter between civilization and the frontier. It is about men’s fear of losing their mastery, and hence their identity, both of which the Western tirelessly reinvents” (44).

In *Heller with a Gun* (1955), Louis L’Amour wrote of the West that “it was a hard land, and it bred hard men to hard ways” (15). The advantages of the cowboy existence cannot be separated from its inherent dangers -- though these dangers are not always the exciting sort that compels hardened men to commendable feats. Michael Johnson contends that the cowboy is in “an evolutionary cul-de-sac in an overtechnologized world” (344) -- that is, there is no forward momentum associated with him; he is an historical figure propelled into contemporary existence purely out of resistance to a demasculinised future. William Kittredge, in an article for the *New York Times Magazine* following the shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999, blames the western cowboy myth for instilling in young boys “the lonesome virtues of outlaw heroes,” and contends that “maybe” western boys and men believe in these virtues, rather “than in the common-sense usefulness of compassion” (1999: 221). Indeed, Kittredge goes on to discuss the events of Waco,



Ruby Ridge, and the Oklahoma City bombings, and to blame in part the ethos of the West, one that emphasises cowboy vigilantism and an eschewal of external authority. The West -- and Montana, in particular -- seems to be a breeding ground (or at least, a safe and isolated repository) for extremist, anti-government militia groups who are avid gun-rights advocates. Certainly, to ascribe the climate of such political extremism (in evidence since the early 1990s) solely to the promulgation of a western cowboy culture would be too pat, but it is plausible to consider the attraction of the West's mythology (of isolation, of self-reliance, and of traditional masculinity) for clusters of right-wing conspiracy-theorists intent on recreating a governmental system that favours white men as leaders.

A particularly interesting aspect of the West's affiliation with cowboy-ism is its necessary exclusion of women. Just as the New Man attempts to bridge the gender gap by becoming more feminised, the cowboy completely ignores the gender gap by dismissing women from his hyper-masculine stronghold in the West. Fiction writers -- even those who have penned "anti-Westerns" that attempt to subvert the region's mythology -- remain

within the parameters of a masculine world ... the female figure simply becomes a man, or at least a more androgynous figure who can adopt masculine characteristics in order to experience the West ... access to the West has almost always been achieved, whether the individual is male or female, through performing white masculine constructions. (Himmelwright, 121, 120)

Women, in their historical and traditional roles, cannot survive in this "technologically primitive environment" (Tompkins, 34) -- or so we are led to believe. Instead, women who go West (or who already exist in the West) must perform their gender differently from their counterparts in other American regions. Contemporary western women, Johnson notes, are "no litigious prudes ... they're half mother-ranchera, half playmate-dominatrix" (15). The most famous female

figure of the early West, in fact, was Annie Oakley, who “became part of ... the West by winning her way with a gun: a man’s thing, the very thing, in fact, that had won the West itself” (McMurtry, 1989: 30). The circumstances will determine whether images of western women as hardened individuals equally capable of tough physical labour and sexual appeal are inherently dangerous, as they threaten long-held values of American womanhood -- or if it is liberating, as Sandra Myres argues. Myres writes about women of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, noting that in the West, women were no longer beholden to “Eastern-dictated models of femininity ... [the women of the west] stepped out of woman’s place with few regrets” (11). Can cowboy mythology, which is certainly dangerous to retrogressive men who choose to live a hardscrabble, violent life separately from women, also be inclusive of women who, in turn, choose to rid themselves of the trappings of traditional femininity? Indeed, can it even free women from the shackles of cultural expectations of gender, allowing them to exist in an environment where necessity -- not propriety -- dictates the standards of behaviour?

Such questions can only plausibly be answered on a personal basis, but what must be considered is the fact that the western mythology is not inherently gender-exclusive. The cowboy is certainly a major component of the mythology, but his ideology only exists within a mainframe of western myth, one that is founded upon ideals of escapism and the opportunity to start life anew. American men may conceive of this ideal as the prospect to reclaim a forgotten masculinity, but equally, American women may conceive of this ideal as the chance to discard traditional femininity and pursue an existence devoid of cultural expectations of gender performance.

## An Avenue Into the Past: Living History in the West

The destination of a journey westward is not simply a new place, where place can be considered concrete, an actual landscape rooted in the physical. George Garrett, poet laureate of Virginia, writes in “A Summoning of Place” -- an essay published for *The Virginia Quarterly Review* in 2003 -- that “the past may be another country ... That is, another place” (436).<sup>50</sup> Garrett takes his inspiration for this thought from a letter written to Henry James by Sarah Orne Jewett, who disagreed with James’ criticism of historical fiction, and wrote that “It is human nature to imagine, to put yourself in another’s shoes. The past may be another country” (ibid). Inasmuch as the American West is a domestic landscape, and neither Garrett nor Jewett “imagined” themselves in this region, their comments resonate within the context of the western myth. Heading West in search of a simplified existence or an antiquated masculinity is essentially a quest for an historical moment; the West functions as a repository for a brand of American culture that has become obsolete in other American regions. “The present of the New West,” Johnson writes, “is a border between the past and the future” (358): that is, the future that potential westerners aim to escape, and the past that they hope to achieve.

For Michael Johnson, however, the existence of the past in the present in the West is perpetuated by the respective populations of each period. He distinguishes “Old Westers” from “New Westers,” portraying the latter as caricatures of the original western settlers. They are concerned primarily with superficial westernness, and have come in search of a commodified version of the West. Old Westers, conversely, are throwbacks to the traditional West -- that is, the traditional mythological West. Tony Hillerman summarises the differences between Old and New Westers, as well as the relationship between the two groups: “If you have car

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<sup>50</sup> Garrett’s phrasing recalls the famous first line of L.P. Hartley’s 1953 novel, *The Go-Between*; he wrote that “the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” (1).

trouble out in the empty West, no Old Wester will pass without stopping to help. If somebody does drive by, you can with certainty accuse him of being an easterner or, worse, a New Wester” (1993). Hillerman attaches morality to the Old Westers, while clearly delineating the unfavourable opinion Old Westers hold of New Westers. Old Westers, as their title would imply, have been in (and of) the West for a lengthy period of time, while New Westers are merely tourists who have decided to stay. Ironically, of course, all Westers (excluding indigenous peoples) were at one point New Westers, but the stigmatisation of contemporary New Westers is potent. Significantly, while the West in the American imagination is a region embedded in the past, it is also a place where, as Johnson suggests, the past and the future (the Old Westers and the Almost-Old Westers) coexist in an uneasy relationship. Johnson identifies Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose* as one of the first western novels to address this “issue,” noting that Stegner deals with “the spatial axis of East and West and the temporal axis of Old West and New West” (109). Thirty years after the publication of Stegner’s novel, the film version of Annie Proulx’s short story, “Brokeback Mountain,” was released; it quickly became known as the ‘gay cowboy movie,’ and indeed, the movie is both about cowboys and homosexuality -- or more accurately, two cowboys who happen to be homosexual. What is vital, though, is perspective: undoubtedly this film makes important statements about contemporary attitudes towards homosexuality, but it is also, at its core, a western, with very traditional western elements. The backdrop of the film forces the viewer to recognise the harshness of a land where snow falls in August, where economic deprivation forces men to work hard, physically, in order to survive -- and where survival depends wholly on the land itself. The collision of the old with the new (the cowboy with open homosexuality) provides a potent illustration of their parallel existence in the West.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Though the film’s timeline spans several late twentieth-century decades, the positive *reception* of the film’s contents -- tradition juxtaposed with the controversial -- indicates a new recognition of the muddled nature of the past’s relationship with the present and future in the West.

Robert Brinkmeyer, in his original contemplation of southern literature's relationship with the West, contends that "to go imaginatively west ... [is to] step outside history and responsibility" (11). Indeed, declares Jack Burden, of *All the King's Men*, the West is "the end of History" (311),<sup>52</sup> and Brinkmeyer adds: "that is, space unburdened by history, space where a person can begin anew, leaving the past behind" (16). It would be more accurate, however, to claim that in going West, adventurers exchange their *personal* past for a collective past, as represented and promised by the West. The western space is not unburdened by history; rather, it is a contemporary embodiment of the nation's history and an opportunity to discard the mistakes and regrets of an individual existence.

### The South/West Connection

In consideration of these three factors, then -- the mythology of the West, the region's prescribed hyper-masculinity, and its ability to transport its advocates into the past -- southern literature's burgeoning relationship with the West seems logical. The South and the West, after all, are two American regions that feature prominently in the nation's imagination, and have both been afflicted by the burden of overwhelming stigmatisation. "Like the western United States," writes Allison Graham in *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, "the American South has existed largely as an imaginary landscape in the nation's popular arts. Mass-produced and commercially circulated images over the last century and a half have borne little relationship to the history -- or even geography -- of either region" (335). In her essay, "Through the Cumberland Gap," Doris Betts argues that if there is a "ubiquitous 'western' story ... there is [also] a ubiquitous 'southern'

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<sup>52</sup> Penn Warren's phrase is echoed in a 1989 essay (and a 1992 book) by Francis Fukuyama, entitled "The End of History?" wherein he argues that the universalisation of democracy (particularly, Western liberal) may be the death knell for man's ideological evolution. Fukuyama in turn borrowed the phrasing from Karl Marx ("the end of prehistory"), who himself owed a debt to Hegel.

stereotype, containing wealthy plantations, southern belles, fat black mammies, and aggrieved -- perhaps decadent -- Confederates” (12). As much as the “legendary Deep South” no longer exists in its original form, the “legendary Wild West” has also given way to a more updated version of a western mythology. Merely *knowing*, however, the incongruity between fact and fiction does not necessarily diminish faith in the latter. Doris Betts writes that while her family was never wealthy enough to participate in the myth of the glorified South, and she was “never much interested in our homegrown Dixie myth,” she has still “always loved the western one, exaggerations and all” (13). Her knowledge of the lack of a “monolithic South” did not prevent her from participating in the myth of the West; indeed, heading west, she half imagined herself arriving in the midst of a gunfight. More importantly, even *after* she became aware of the myth’s falsities, she still wrote of the West in its mythological context, thereby becoming not only a participant in, but a propagator of a myth she had found to be false.

This is not to criticise Betts, of course -- merely to highlight the contemporaneous juxtaposition of mythology and reality within the western region, and more significantly, within the same person. Neither myth nor fact disrupts the validity of the other: there is not one faction of Americans that believes in the mythology of the South and the West, and another that does not. The national psyche depends so wholeheartedly on its image (and its imagery) that deviations from a myth are compartmentalised and attributed to other sources; such inconsistencies rarely destroy a myth.<sup>53</sup>

This element of the South/West relationship is crucial, as it helps explain why there continues to be a steady stream of southerners journeying west. Southerners who have gone west and discovered personally that all is not in perfect concordance with their preconceived image of that region do not necessarily impart that

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<sup>53</sup> This coexistence of myth and reality recalls the psychological phenomena of the primacy and recency effects: what a person experiences most recently (i.e., the reality of the contemporary West) does not diminish the impact of what that person learned *first* (i.e., the mythology of the West).

information to southerners at home. Most importantly, they do not necessarily even stop believing in the myth themselves, because as much as evidence may be presented to disprove the legend, there still exist enough booted cowboys and militia groups to lend it credence. Those southerners and southern writers who have gone west have done so because the West, more than any other American region, supports a mystical façade that is familiar to southerners.

The palpable masculinity of the mythological West is particularly attractive to southern men, whose gendered identity was threatened not only by the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, but also by the Civil Rights Movement and the general upheaval of economic restructuring. During that period, the previously unchallenged dominance of the southern white male suddenly came under attack; particularly, as Jefferson Humphries and John Lowe state in their 1996 collection of essays on *The Future of Southern Letters*:

The southern “good old boy” has had to make room for professional women, educated African-Americans, and new immigrants like the Vietnamese, Cambodians and Haitians. The rural past has been eclipsed by an ever-expanding urban present, centered on high-finance, high-tech wheeling-dealing, which takes place in high-rise postmodern skyscrapers, hub airports, and gigantic shopping malls. (3-4)

Cultural signposts quickly displayed the influence of the outside world on the South: brand names and chain stores and restaurants that had previously only existed outside the South were now appearing alongside new highways and in towns, slowly reupholstered to resemble their northern (or Californian, or New England) counterparts. The southern economy was resuscitated after the Second World War, and southern cities began to grow rapidly. Television and other media were introducing the United States to the South, and social and literary theorists speculated wildly that the demise of the South (in its original state) was imminent.<sup>54</sup> In 1971,

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<sup>54</sup> This idea will be further explicated in Chapter 7’s discussion of place and displacement.

sociologists John McKinney and Linda Bourque published an article entitled “The Changing South: National Incorporation of a Region;” they concluded that “the South has been changing *more* rapidly than the rest of the nation,” and becoming “more like the rest of American society in terms of its primary dimensions of living.” Further, “the South, which has seemed like another country for so long ... is now sharing in a national (and, in many respects, international) culture” (399, 401). All of these changes heralded a level of uncertainty for white southern men that went beyond that experienced by other American men; consequently, the second stage of the reactive process against feminism was more pronounced in the South than in other regions. Southern men -- and southern male authors -- increasingly looked westward for future inspiration.

It would be remiss to claim that southern literature following this period of social, cultural, and economic disruption merely deemed it unfashionable to either discuss or glorify traditional values, all but forcing its progenitors to look elsewhere for artistic freedom -- although many critics have done as much. Instead, it would be more accurate to note that southern literature, after this time, expanded both its internal and external boundaries, creating space on its shelves for new southern concerns. African American and female authors, whose literary presence had previously been caricatured, now occupy a central sphere within the southern literary canon. For example, Bobbie Ann Mason, Dorothy Allison, and Josephine Humphreys all produced crucial southern texts in the 1980s and 1990s that reveal the plight of women in the South and also provide an intimate examination of arenas previously peripheral or taboo. Likewise, southern writing by African Americans has also increased in prominence and significance (for example, that of Gayl Jones, Ernest Gaines, or Randall Kenan -- although it should be noted that *female* African American writing is a distinct and important category itself). Like autobiographical writing, this new fiction has also provided a voice for previously neglected



communities. Certainly, writing *about* African Americans, *by* African Americans, has created a vivid, unifying and centralising canon for the most dangerously “othered” members of southern culture. This inclusion of historically marginalised voices raised additional concerns for southern white males, and southern, white, male authors. In a culture that had thrived on its socially vegetative state, the inherent difficulty of adopting such monumental changes forced the previous leaders of the canon -- still in search of traditional southern concerns -- to look outside the South. The West’s social and literary environments, areas that refuse to include women in their midst, provide the perfect arena in which southern, white, male authors can freely explore the roots of their masculine impulses.

There is a very real desire now occurring in the South – derived largely from a sense of nostalgia – to regain the past charms and traditions of this region. America has come to the South, and southerners have responded with equal amounts of gratitude for a more stable southern economy and yearning for the apparently simple lifestyle of their past; what southerners have discovered is that perhaps their past lies not in the South but in the West.

### **Offutt’s Journey West: The Road to The Good Brother**

For Chris Offutt, not being able to “test himself in sanctioned ways against other men” equals emasculation. His version of masculinity gels with Michael Messner’s, and is especially marked by a devotion to “homosocial institutions.”<sup>55</sup> As we have seen in *The Same River Twice*, Offutt participates wholly in the traditional conceptualisation of masculinity, an association that supercedes his own failure to gain access to idolised homosocial institutions: the army, the park rangers, the fire brigade, and the police force. Following his spate of institutional rejections, Offutt

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<sup>55</sup> The term “homosocial” is generally attributed to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her book, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*.

felt as though his only option was to leave Kentucky. His mother accompanied him to the ever-advancing interstate highway, the I-64, where he looked at the “fresh, clean blacktop” and thought “of Daniel Boone[,] questing for space. The road in had become a way out” (SR, 21). Offutt imagined himself an explorer, an old-fashioned pioneer on the cusp of a great discovery. He resents the intrusion of the outside world into his eastern Kentucky idyll, but recognises its advantages and opportunities. Heading first for New York, Offutt began his extended period of interstate travel; he ventured out in search of something grander than Appalachia could offer, and has occasionally returned for periods of renewal or convalescence.

After his first such return, Offutt struck out once again, “heading like Daniel Boone for elbow room,” (SR, 44) restating his allegiance to the most famous Kentucky pioneer. The author had introduced Boone early on, just as he introduced himself: “I was born and raised on a ridge in Eastern Kentucky, in the middle of the Daniel Boone National Forest” (SR, 12). The author binds his existence to the mythology of the nation’s early settlers; he describes Boone as the ultimate Traditional Man (in distinct opposition to the New Man), who fathered each of his sixteen children on an annual visit home to Kentucky. Finally, Boone “left the state in 1799, feeling crowded by the appearance of a new neighbour twenty miles away. At age eighty-five, he died the hero’s death -- choking to death on a sweet potato” (SR, 53). Offutt’s adventuring anecdotes express his idolisation of Boone: he imagines that on his travels, he is a modern-day pioneer, pushing back the frontier in a bid for autonomy and the assertion of traditional masculinity, emphasising survival and community with the natural environment. The author takes his cues from “the ghost of Daniel Boone,” who finally directs him westward; he begins his journey with faith in the mythology of the West. Offutt claims that he “tarried hard in the West, eager to find a home. American boys are raised knowing that a horse between your legs and a low-slung pistol are a guarantee of manhood. It worked for Billy the

Kid, who shot seventeen men in the back before he reached legal age” (SR, 69). Offutt presents the mythology of the West as fact: boys who “know” that the most widely recognised symbols of the west -- cowboys, guns, and horses -- also “know” that these are the keys to the masculine ideal. Soon after his arrival in the West, however, Offutt began to discover pockmarks in the mythology of the region. Washing dishes in a hot kitchen at the Grand Canyon, he met Hopi Indian women who sold “copper-hued plastic dolls dressed in fringed felt. The hollow foot of each bore an inked stamp that read ‘Made in Japan’”(SR, 68-69). Offutt’s boss at the restaurant, a “sneering spud named Jackie Jr.” was, “like many dwellers of the West, ... pretend[ing] to be a cowboy.” He wore “hand-tooled boots, expensive hats, and tailored shirts with pearl snaps” (SR, 70). Nonetheless, Offutt began to realise that while the western image might be largely pretence, there is still a cultural participation in that charade. People like Jackie Jr., however, are no doubt the “New Westers” of whom Michael Johnson writes, those who propagate a false lifestyle in the hopes that it will return them to an authentic one -- artificial and manufactured though that “authenticity” might be.

So begins Chris Offutt’s journey into the American West, as he “slalomed the past, searching for a genetic base to [his] wanderings” (SR 59). The imagery here of “slaloming” -- a side to side movement down an otherwise straight path -- is apt, as Offutt now begins traversing the United States. His “search” is a masked attempt to justify his desire to escape his home hill. Offutt begins *The Same River Twice* believing his journey to be a quest for freedom; he only realises -- ten years later -- that freedom has nothing to do with location, a realisation that will inform the subsequent journey of the fictional Virgil Caudill. Furthermore, the “genetic base” Offutt seeks is his desire to rationalise his departure from Kentucky in an acceptably southern way. Abandoning Appalachia is a delicate matter, and Offutt understands that he must portray his venture as a journey *towards* another place, not as an escape

from home. His need for freedom can only be legitimised by his identification with a clan of historically influential Appalachians who have proven themselves more enterprising than their kinfolk. Offutt heads West to redefine his self and his masculinity, and his purposeful affiliation with Boone both justifies his wanderings and reinstates his fealty to Appalachia.

The following chapter will examine Offutt's manifestation of his personal journey in the fictional character of Virgil Caudill, as Virgil finds himself unable to remain in Kentucky, in a community that he finds increasingly stifling. Virgil soon discovers, though, that leaving Appalachia is a delicate matter, and the first half of *The Good Brother* is dedicated to resolving this issue in a tactful and acceptable manner. The second half, however, is devoted to Virgil's experiences away from home, and provides a fitting segue into Offutt's next book, *Out of the Woods*. In Montana, Virgil feels overwhelmingly homesick as he discovers the degree to which his identity is bound up with that of Appalachia. Like so many other southerners, Virgil's dream of the West revealed itself to be largely fictional, and *The Good Brother* reflects the difficulty of beginning life anew in a disappointing environment. Moreover, this novel portrays the sadness that accompanies knowing that returning home is no longer a possibility.

## Chapter 6

### Souls on the Run: *The Good Brother Goes West*

A. B. Guthrie Jr.'s novel, *The Big Sky* (1947) traces Kentuckian Boone Caudill's journey West, to Montana. "The West of *The Big Sky*," Wallace Stegner writes in his foreword to the 2002 edition of Guthrie's novel, "is Innocence, anti-civilization, savage and beautiful and doomed, a dream that most Americans, however briefly or vainly, have dreamed" (x). Guthrie died in 1991, but his *New York Times* obituary notes his dedication to dispelling the myths of the West, quoting an earlier interview in which Guthrie declared his "sense of morality about it ... I want to talk about real people in real times. For every Wyatt Earp or Billy the Kid, there were thousands of people trying to get along" (Severo, April 27, 1991). Guthrie's vision of the West is echoed in Chris Offutt's sentiments about his responsibilities toward Appalachia: "I hoped to depict life in the hills as similar to life anywhere -- people striving to do well for themselves and their families" ("Getting it Straight"). The overt similarities between Guthrie's novel and Offutt's *The Good Brother* -- the surnames of their main characters (Caudill), and the trajectory of their route, from Kentucky to Montana -- are buttressed by the two authors' ideological responsibilities towards the regions they represent in their fiction.

*The Good Brother* expands upon the struggles the author introduced in *Kentucky Straight* and *The Same River Twice*: the difficulties of the isolated Appalachian culture, the confusion of uncertain and alien masculine ideology, and the turmoil of deracination. These struggles are reflected in the physical structure of the novel, neatly bisected; the first sections focus on Virgil Caudill's anguish following the death of his brother, Boyd -- particularly, his opposition to the Appalachian community's thirst for revenge, and his realisation that he no longer

belongs in his native region. The latter half of the novel concentrates on the new Virgil, now called Joe Tiller, as he attempts to integrate himself into Montanan society, and reinvent himself as a man emptied of personal history. The two halves of the novel function as a symbolic representation of the novel's inherently dualistic concerns. Offutt's juxtaposition of Kentucky and Montana frames larger questions of cultural identity, allowing the latter location to lend insight to his feelings about Kentucky, by virtue of its disparities. Accepted ideologies only enter the consciousness when it becomes apparent that they are not universally accepted; Virgil's time in the West -- and the oddities he witnesses there -- compels him to compare his former home with his present one.

Colette, the restless heroine of Tim Gautreaux's *The Next Step in the Dance* (1998) yearns to leave her small hometown in Louisiana; she asks, "Have you ever really looked at this town? Really looked at it? You know, when you live in a place all your life, you can't really see it" (22). Virgil's impending departure from Appalachia and subsequent period of reflection in Montana forces him to examine the true nature of his home place -- its faults, especially -- and his role within that culture. Henry Thoreau writes, in *Walden*, that "every man has to learn the points of compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves" (171). Virgil has somnambulated through the years of his life in Appalachia; his forced exodus rouses him from this sleep and removes the drugging familiarity of his world. Offutt's division of the integrally opposing narratives affords both Virgil Caudill and readers of *The Good Brother* an opportunity to benefit from the reflective nature of opposition, and indicates both the profoundly divisive effects of straddling two alien cultures, and its potential for self-discovery.

Virgil's life in Kentucky consists of a series of events that are enacted without his influence, creating a cycle in which he is -- at best -- a passive participant and --

at worst -- content in his own ignorance. He is a garbage collector, a profession that does little to fuel real ambition. After a collector becomes salaried, his name is sewn onto a blue shirt -- and Virgil "dearly wanted his name on a shirt" (GB, 22). His only other aspiration is to buy the "ancient log cabin" in which his father had been raised: "He would dismantle it and move it to a spot beside Clay Creek. He'd rent a mini-dozer and carve a road that wound through the woods" (GB, 53). Virgil is content with his modest dreams -- just as he is content to date a woman whom he does not love, and to live in a trailer in his mother's backyard. Virgil's most exciting anecdotes are told vicariously, as it is not he who has experienced them, but his brother, Boyd. The first half of the narrative does not focus on what Virgil Caudill is, or does, or wants; it focuses on what Virgil is not (Boyd), what he does not do (take action), and what he does not want to do (kill Rodale).

After Boyd is murdered by Billy Rodale, the revenge-motivated society that envelops rural Appalachia impels Virgil to kill Billy. This is, after all, the region that produced and embraced the famed Hatfield-McCoy feud in the nineteenth century, which spanned more than a dozen years and as many deaths. The most famous description of the Appalachian propensity for revenge was published in Harry Caudill's<sup>56</sup> popular 1962 work, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*. Caudill writes a tale so sensational as to appear fictitious, filled with characters not so much at the margins of society but so far beyond its borders that they become legendary. He quotes an Austrian traveller, Karl Anton Postl, as commenting that a Kentuckian of the early nineteenth century "will wait three or four weeks in the woods, for the moment of satiating his revenge; and he seldom or never forgives" (Caudill, 18). Similarly, Harry Crews explains that while his native Georgia and east Kentucky are

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<sup>56</sup> The names of several authors and characters discussed in this chapter are rather similar. "Virgil Caudill" is the protagonist of Offutt's novel; "Harry Caudill" is the author of *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*; "Harry Crews" is another Appalachian writer, author of *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*; and "Boone Caudill" is the hero of Guthrie's *The Big Sky*.

neither wholly different from one another, neither are they similar to the rest of their contemporary United States. He writes:

In Bacon County, the sheriff was the man who tried to keep the peace, but if you had any real trouble, you did not go to him for help to make it right. You made it right yourself or else became known in the county as a man who was defenseless without the sheriff at his back. If that ever happened, you would be brutalized and savaged endlessly because of it. Men killed other men oftentimes not because there had been some offense that merited death, but simply because there had been an offense, any offense. (8)<sup>57</sup>

The difficulty of resisting participation in these barbaric customs in a culture that aligns manhood with violence is made obvious as, in turn, each member of Virgil's community reminds him of his duty to avenge Boyd's death in kind. The Appalachian method of meting out justice emphasises independence -- and failure to endorse that independence is to risk permanent ostracism. Virgil's reluctance to enact this masculine tradition jeopardises the respect of his peers; meanwhile, the narrow-mindedness of his kinfolk ensures his ideological withdrawal from their ranks. Harry Caudill also claims that Appalachia's isolation contributes to its preoccupation with violence: "without distractions from the larger "outside world" to attract the highlanders' attention and hold their interests, each personal affront or injury was remembered and recounted" (51). However, he also states -- unfairly -- that "these were simple people lacking complexity in emotional or mental makeup. They were quick to anger and quick to carry that anger into effective action against the offender" (39). Very little, it seems, has progressed in the period between *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s and *The Good Brother*: the outside world still has not settled in rural Kentucky, and its citizens have not abandoned their supposed bloodlust. Virgil is tormented by well-meaning townsfolk, who approach him at the

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<sup>57</sup> Such sentiments are echoed in Offutt's earlier story, "Blue Lick," as discussed in Chapter 2 and the examination of *Kentucky Straight*. This notion of self-governance also featured prominently in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*; he wrote: "It is only the great mediocrity that goes to law in these personal matters."



post office, at work, and at the Dairy Queen to give him information they assume he does not have: "It was a Rodale done it. Billy Rodale" (GB, 17). The culture's thirst for revenge is so prevalent that the only imaginable explanation for Virgil's inactivity is ignorance of the murderer's identity. That Virgil has no personal desire to avenge Boyd -- or, more simply, to become a murderer himself -- is unconscionable to his fellow Appalachians, whose cultural morality skews the act of murder so that it appears honourable. Virgil's dilemma lies in the impossibility of maintaining membership in a community that cannot accommodate his assertion of a divergent personal ideal.

As the novel opens, Boyd's death is already four months past; Virgil has had ample time to ruminate on his choices. The action of *The Good Brother*, however, opens with a sense of an anticipated climax, as every facet of Virgil's life is consumed by his brother's death. Within the Caudill family, Boyd was the "good" brother: he was the pride of his mother and sister, and Virgil's protector; his death has left this already-depleted family in limbo. Offutt writes of the confusion over mail collection and yard maintenance: "four months after [Boyd's] death, the family was still trying to divvy up chores" (GB, 20). As he mows his mother's lawn (formerly, his brother's chore), he notices that a tree has fallen over the edge of the hill, and is clinging to the edge. Virgil is "stunned to realize that the hill was falling slowly away" (GB, 38) and shows this erosion to his brother-in-law, Marlon. Marlon assures Virgil that there is no imminent danger, that "the house'll last awhile yet," to which Virgil replies, "But will the hill?" (GB, 39). The very foundations of Virgil Caudill's life -- his family, the land upon which he was raised, and his community -- are all eroding, decayed by his sudden realisation that he no longer belongs to this group or

this region.<sup>58</sup> With this awareness comes Virgil's momentous decision: to leave Appalachia permanently.

Fundamentally, this decision is not precipitated by a resolution to kill Billy Rodale. After his confrontation with Taylor, his colleague, Virgil retreats to the woods, where he gets drunk and thinks about Boyd. The idea of escape suddenly consumes him, and "he wished a helicopter would pick him up and drop him somewhere" (GB, 61). "Flight," writes Catherine Himmelwright, "is essential" (125). The killing of Rodale is incidental to Virgil's desire for escape: he does not kill Rodale and then flee; first, he decides to leave Kentucky, and then "it occurred to him that if he was going to leave, he might as well go ahead and kill Rodale first" (GB, 62). Offutt's language reflects Virgil's laconic attitude to the act of murder: he does not "decide" to kill Rodale -- he merely thought that he "might as well go ahead" and exact the revenge his peers demand. Virgil's decision to leave Kentucky is his first conscious act in the novel, and foretells his acquisition of a mental as well as an actual new identity.

Robert Brinkmeyer discusses the predicament facing any southerner who seeks escape from the South. Mildly, he notes that "southern fiction ... tends to celebrate those who do not leave the community but integrate themselves into it" and then more forcefully asserts that "a solitary figure breaking free from the community would, in the fiction of most southern writers, be less a hero than a potential psychopath, a person tragically alone and isolated, cut off from the nourishing bonds of family and community" (4).<sup>59</sup> In order for Virgil Caudill to escape Kentucky and yet retain the approval of his kinsmen, he must make his exit in a sanctioned manner. Offutt's short story, "Out of the Woods," features Gerald's westward journey to

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<sup>58</sup> Virgil's concern of erosion echoes that of Lucille Odom, the precocious teenager of Josephine Humphreys' *Rich in Love*. Lucille sees a computer-generated "map of the coastline of South Carolina as it would appear fifty years from now. I studied this map carefully. *We were not on it*. Our house, town, most of the city of Charleston, were shown in blue, i. e., covered by water" (8).

<sup>59</sup> Brinkmeyer's conception of the potential psychopath recalls French-Canadian group politics, where those who leave the community are viewed as *vendus*, or "sell-outs." In Hispanic culture, they are known similarly as *vendidos*.

retrieve the body of his brother-in-law. Gerald's wife, Kay, contemplating her brother's initial desertion of Appalachia, summarises the cultural interpretation of such an act: "Him leaving never made sense ... He hadn't done nothing and nobody was after him" (OW, 20). Virgil Caudill's decision to kill Billy Rodale thus, ironically, enables him to escape respectably. He will "do something" and someone (one of Rodale's many cousins, presumably) will come "after him." The murder of Billy Rodale legitimises Virgil Caudill's retreat, even as it simultaneously makes him a reprobate elsewhere in America. Like the author aligning himself with the legacy of Daniel Boone, the murder of Billy Rodale is the perfect mask for Virgil's departure: his community will respectfully understand that his flight is necessary for survival (from the law and from Rodale's murderous relatives), artfully concealing Virgil's intentional withdrawal from Appalachian society.

The circumstances surrounding the impending murder of Billy Rodale test Virgil's previously untried self-sufficiency. In absolute secrecy, Virgil becomes the mastermind of the perfect escape, and for the first time in his life, has to undertake a task not already conquered by his brother Boyd. Blake dePastino, in the *Weekly Wire*, falsely terms Virgil "a bumpkin of surprising innocence. He is cripplingly shy and painfully naïve, so unaccustomed to the ways of the world that he seems at first like some Faulknerian man-child" (June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1997). Virgil hardly seems shy as he gleefully plays practical jokes on his co-workers in the early scenes of the novel, and is savvy enough to take advantage of the prejudices of Lexington social security clerks. The challenge of creating a new identity, however, does reveal a certain naïveté, as Virgil must now negotiate unfamiliar systems and bureaucracies. His uncertainty surrounding the particulars does not detract, however, from his confidence in the grand scope of his plan, which centres upon his inverted way of making decisions: "he had no idea what he wanted to do, but he was pretty sure what he didn't want to do" (GB, 74). Of course, what he does not *want* to do is kill

Rodale, but even more powerful than that is what he *will* not do: live within a culture that, idiosyncratically, views his reticence as an indication of diminished masculinity or morality. “Everything came back to killing Rodale,” Virgil thinks, “and that made him sick. He didn’t even hunt. What he wanted was his father’s cabin and to be left alone. He’d marry Abigail and have a mess of kids and get his name on a shirt” (GB, 75). The limited choices that Virgil faces (kill Rodale, or live a life of ridicule and ostracism) are presented within a cultural context that nullifies the semantics of the word “choice.” Virgil’s “options” consist, simply, of a decision between two evils. The “psychopath” that Brinkmeyer notes thus becomes a new sort of southern hero in *The Good Brother*, someone familiar enough with Appalachian culture to manipulate its ideology to suit his own craving for escape.

### **The Wild Brother: Two Boyds and the Potential for Re-Creation**

The dualistic nature of the character of Boyd serves as a microcosm for several important facets of *The Good Brother*: it foreshadows Virgil’s belief in the feasibility of adopting the entirely new identity of Joe Tiller; it supports the binary structure of the novel itself; and perhaps most importantly, it embodies the complexities of contemporary southern masculinity. The reader is first introduced to Boyd as “the restless one, the wild brother ... He drove fast, drank hard, played cards, and chased women” (GB, 19). This image, however, is soon contradicted by another, one that displays Boyd as a doting son who “obeyed his mother, hauling water and splitting stovewood, supplying fresh meat in fall and fish in summer. The other Boyd existed away from the house.” There are, Virgil notes, “two Boyds” (GB, 31). Boyd is divided by his natural, but contradictory predilections; as much as he “had a way of using people up,” simply because he had “out-wilded” all those courageous enough to attempt to keep pace with his proclivities, Boyd was also

Virgil's older brother, who had, as a boy, raced first up the attic stairs "to dispel the monsters and ensure his brother's safe passage." Boyd, isolated by alternating bouts of intense familial responsibility and psychotic dare-devilishness, had "never had a best friend" (GB, 31). Boyd's audacity revealed a lack of concern for his own safety, and an exaggerated concern for the well-being of others. He was a man of two selves: one contained within the comfort and privacy of his home hill, and another, legendary throughout eastern Kentucky.

Offutt writes that after the Caudills' father died, "Boyd had never held a regular job. He stayed at home with their mother" (GB, 31); Boyd's wild alter ego became an escape from the stultifying drudgery of his own life. Having resigned himself to the limitations of a life in Appalachia, Boyd was a man who "never predicted, but accepted each day's fate" (GB, 69). Instead, he used alcohol to create the luxury of an unpredictable future. When Virgil gets drunk from bootlegged liquor for the first time, he finally "understood how a man could get in the habit. It was fun and there was a sense of freedom and risk, the anticipation of an unknown outcome" (GB, 65). He now realises why it had held such appeal for Boyd.

The events of Virgil's life have all been experienced first by Boyd. After the death, their sister Sara tells Virgil that he "always let Boyd do the doing" for him; Boyd was the leader, and Virgil was content to exist in his shadow (GB, 42). In several instances, a variation on the phrase "Boyd always went first" (GB, 31) is repeated, often as Virgil remembers Boyd doing something dangerous. Just before Virgil decides to escape using the alias of 'Joe Tiller,' though, Offutt rephrases that statement: "Boyd had gone first. He always did ... Now he was first dead" (GB, 80). The shift in verb tense -- from "went" to "gone" -- alters the implication, and gives Boyd's previous daring a sense of fatality. The qualities that made people revere Boyd also, tragically, precipitated his demise. Now, Boyd may have "gone" first, but his premature departure forces Virgil to finally "go first" -- to the west, to Montana,

to restart his life under an assumed identity. Virgil's awareness of the feasibility of such a hazardous act arises from his knowledge of Boyd's personality split: the elder Caudill's simultaneous embodiment of two divergent characters sanctions the success of Virgil's reincarnation as a man of two selves.

Further into the narrative, after Virgil has become entangled with the Bills (the militia group in Montana), he surmises that "Boyd could have lived easily among [this group of renegades], enjoying the camaraderie of weapons, the flirtation with being a small-time outlaw" (GB, 293). What Virgil really thinks, though, is that *Boyd* should have gone west; heading west is an act best suited to the mythical adventurer, and Virgil has certainly never been that. In Montana, Virgil thinks often of his dead brother, and how Boyd would have thrived there. Although he harbours suspicion of the Bills' ideology, Virgil knows that Boyd would have easily become one of them; he muses that "under the right circumstances, [Boyd] might have helped produce the pamphlets" (GB, 293) -- the offensive brochures restating the Bill of Rights, using racist and prejudicial language and imagery. Virgil's contention is not a suggestion of Boyd's racism, merely a validation of the elder Caudill's ability to integrate into and command any social faction. The bootlegger in the woods had said of Boyd that "men wanted to be his buddy and women wanted him their way" (GB, 59); this description could easily apply to Frank, the leader of the Bills, whom Botree (Virgil's new girlfriend) describes as "fun and ... powerful and he could talk for hours" (GB, 292). Earlier, Virgil had "thought of Boyd's ability to make conversation with anyone, by continuing to talk until someone responded" (GB, 153). Both Boyd and Frank are portrayed as leaders, men to whom other men respond, men whose natural magnetism garners loyal followers.

The tragic flaw, however, of both Boyd and Frank is their inability to control their reckless impulses. After the death of his brother, Virgil learns that "Boyd's directness endeared him to people who'd become accustomed to being discarded"

(GB, 31) -- just as all those who found themselves in Montana, their land seized by a government that seemed to care more about the dollars of outsiders than the livelihoods of natives, turned to Frank after they had been summarily “discarded.” Botree tries to explain to Joe the fealty of the Bills to their leader and to his ideals: “You have to understand, it felt good for people to be together. It’s been hard for small ranchers” (GB, 292). Frank’s ebullience has unified these ranchers, and their quest for community has caused them to abandon logic and sensibility.<sup>60</sup> When Joe asks Botree why her brothers participated in the printing of the racist pamphlets, she replies, “It made Frank like them, Joe. That’s all any of us wanted. It was important” (GB, 292). Frank acts as self-appointed minister of his small flock, and lulls his parishioners into a false sense of comfort and security. In the end, all they are left with is a man slaughtered by “the forces of evil” he so detested, and all that remains of Boyd are memories of a man who “didn’t truly care if he won or lost” (GB, 287, 141). Like the mythology of the West, the magnetism of these two men is predicated upon the aspirations of others: those who ascribe lofty meaning and purpose to mere men, made leaders by a false sense of certitude and daring. The deaths of Boyd and Frank in *The Good Brother* are, ironically, vital to its integrity, for they display the futility of lives lived as fiction.

### **Iconic Femininity in the South and the West**

If the “anti-western” can be explained by its dogmatic refusal to portray the West in a stereotypical fashion, then *The Good Brother* must be understood to be an updated rendition of the anti-western, as it acknowledges the influence and persistence of the western mythology, as well as the discovery of a divergent western reality. However, in her discussion of Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Bean Trees*,

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<sup>60</sup> This abandonment recalls Virgil’s decision to murder Billy Rodale: he discarded his own beliefs in favour of promoting an image of himself that chimed with Appalachian masculinity.

Catherine Himmelwright argues that even the anti-western does not challenge the accepted masculinity of the West. Instead, western fiction insists upon the masculinisation of its female characters, forcing them to become “a more androgynous figure who can adopt masculine characteristics in order to experience the West” (121). The western experience, Himmelwright seems to argue, is *contingent* upon the desertion of the feminine ideal; access to the West is not granted to women who do not embrace the masculine ethos of the region. Offutt’s portrayal of women in the South and in the West conforms to regional imagery of contemporary femininity: in the South, Virgil’s mother, sister, and girlfriend display markedly feminine behaviour, while in the West, Botree and various other women whom Virgil encounters espouse a puzzling mixture of masculine and feminine characteristics. Such a divide contributes to Virgil’s overwhelming sense of cultural displacement, and further confuses his ability to integrate into western society.

Botree embodies the ideal of a woman in the West: she is motherly and nurturing, yet possesses great stores of physical and mental toughness. The reader’s primary encounter with Botree encapsulates both versions of western womanhood, witnessed as she ministers to her patient: “She tugged the blankets to his chin and blotted the perspiration from his forehead. Her touch was firm, the fingers tight with muscle” (GB, 191). The first sentence portrays her as a Florence Nightingale figure, doting and indulgent -- and feminine. The second, however, notes a firm touch and muscular hands -- both distinctly unfeminine characteristics. Botree’s hands are the same ones that later “grab” and “yank” Joe away from the impending danger of an approaching moose and her calf, and they are the hands that have buried automatic weapons in “PVC pipe ... twenty-four inches below the surface” and “put a decoy above them” (GB, 293). Botree is a woman who nurtures all those around her, but can ultimately take care of herself. She is merely one in a succession of western women who have negotiated their femininity in order to survive the harshness of the



West: her “mother taught [her] to shoot and [her] father taught [her] to cook” (GB, 272). Botree’s identity is not subject to the boundaries of masculinity and femininity that burden other American men and women. She is by times a seductress, a conscientious mother, a political zealot, and a stripper. Botree embodies a new kind of western womanhood, one that refuses to be categorised according to traditional precepts.

By contrast, the three main female characters in the first half of *The Good Brother* -- Virgil’s mother, his sister Sara, and his girlfriend Abigail -- form an image of southern femininity that centres around superficialities and deferral to a dominant masculinity. Anne Goodwyn Jones, in her influential text, *Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936*, argues that southern literature forces its female characters to be “compliant, deferential, sacrificial, nurturing, domestic, quietly and uncontroversial intelligent, chaste, beautiful, cultured, religious, and loyal to her region and to its definition of herself” (352). Together, Mrs. Caudill, Sara, and Abigail form a composite of southern womanhood that very closely resembles Goodwyn’s conceptualisation, though retains a distinctively Appalachian bent (in the sense that Appalachian women, while feminine in some of the traditionally southern senses, led necessarily more laborious lives than their southern counterparts’ more decadent ones). Offutt’s replacement of such femininity with the strong female presence in the West offers another subtle rebuke of Appalachian culture: Virgil’s departure indicates not just a desire for escape from the cycle of violence in his region, but from the encroachment of his community, as well.

Virgil’s mother lived in service to the men in her family, providing food and a comfortable home. Though Virgil lived in his own trailer in her back yard,

every morning he stopped by his mother’s house for a brown bag containing a sandwich, apple, and chips. She’d fixed him carry-lunches since he was six years old and walked to school with his brother and dog. Virgil went along with it now although he’d explained to her that it was no longer necessary to mark a V on the paper bag in crayon. (GB, 52)

As much as Appalachian culture is devoted to aged traditions, its inhabitants are intent on perpetuating their own living history. By making Virgil his “carry-lunch” every day and marking the childish paper bag with (what else?) a crayon, she refuses to acknowledge Virgil’s adult status; as long as Virgil’s maturation is stunted, she remains his mother. Mrs. Caudill defines herself in relation to him, her only living male relative: she is his mother; he is her child. In fact, she has no name in the novel other than “Virgil’s mother” or “Mrs. Caudill.” Virgil recalls her staunch devotion to superficial happiness and traditional customs, noting that he had “always found it easy to lie to her because she preferred to embrace falsehoods rather than [to] accept unpleasant facts.” Before he leaves, Virgil feels regret, as he knows that “his departure would mean the loss of another man in her life. She’d be down to a son-in-law” (GB, 115). Mrs. Caudill’s death following Virgil’s departure only reinforces the notion that her sole purpose was to ease the lives of the men in her family. Without any male Caudills left to nurture, her death is inevitable, if not necessary. This woman, whose life can be summed up in the “path worn in the linoleum [that] led from sink to refrigerator to stove” (GB, 115) left by her feet on the kitchen floor, is Virgil’s main point of reference for motherhood and femininity. She will not step on to her own front porch without a man’s permission, but she freely says “I love you, Virge” to her only remaining son’s stammered attempt at farewell. The characterisation of Virgil’s mother reinforces the stereotypical ideals of established southern womanhood and thus by proxy instils in Virgil a dated concept of typical female behaviour.

Virgil’s relationship with his younger sister, Sara, is fraught with unfair judgments and false assumptions. Sara, who would “talk a bird out of its nest” (GB, 20), pits Virgil against every other man in their region, but most especially against their dead brother, Boyd, and her husband, Marlon. She speaks directly and at times

crudely, proudly proclaiming herself as “the only liberated woman on the creek”(GB, 41). The performance of femininity, however, is a major component of her identity: her topics of speech range from having her ovarian tubes tied and not eating dessert for fear of gaining unattractive weight, to lauding Marlon’s many masculine accomplishments. Sara calls Virgil “Virgie” and “honey” and, once, “poop-face” -- terms of questionable endearment that are used nowhere else in *The Good Brother*. In their most serious conversation, Sara tells Virgil that she “should have been born a man ... then you could knock the shit out of me and everything’d be fine” (GB, 42). Sara subscribes wholly to the stereotypically Appalachian method of problem-solving: violence. She is the most vocal of all those pressuring Virgil to kill Billy Rodale, before finally volunteering her husband for the job; she says to Virgil, “If you don’t ... I know someone who will.” She insults him further by claiming that she “thought maybe you’d want Marlon to help you out, is all. You always let Boyd do the doing for you before.” Sara explains her full, albeit inactive, participation in the perpetuation of the revenge cycle of eastern Kentucky by telling Virgil, “that ain’t what it is” when he denies a willingness to “murder.”

Her belief in the merit of this antiquated tradition is as clear as her disdain of those who choose to believe differently. Finally, Virgil can stand no more, and tells her that he guesses “it’s good you ain’t a man ... I don’t believe I’d like you much if you were” (GB, 42). Sara’s femininity excuses her from the consequences of her intrusive behaviour; her suggestions are dismissed verbally or with Virgil’s stubborn silence. And yet, when Taylor, the man at work, makes the same argument as Sara and calls Virgil a coward, Virgil responds physically. He displays more aggression here than elsewhere in the novel: “he leaned his face to Taylor’s until their noses touched. When he spoke, his lips brushed Taylor’s mouth.” He says, “I ain’t that hungry yet” (GB, 55), implying that Taylor is neither worth the effort nor is Virgil bothered enough to actually assault him -- but his stance shows that he *could*. Virgil

is entrenched in a society that values differently the words of men and women, so that the same contentious admonishment from each sex elicits divergent reactions from their recipient.<sup>61</sup> Physical aggression is not an option when dealing with women, so Virgil does not consider striking Sara even though he is comfortable asserting his physicality with Taylor.<sup>62</sup>

Like her mother, Sara freely expresses her feelings for Virgil when he visits before his departure. She says to him, "I love you, Virgil. You're a good brother" (GB, 107). Earlier, however, Virgil had come to believe that his family had "never had him right. He realized with a terrible twist in his chest that they wanted him to be like Boyd" (GB, 41), though Virgil's fraternal love for Boyd is itself untainted by jealousy. When Virgil suggests to Sara that "the best of us is gone," obviously meaning Boyd, Sara tellingly does not disagree. She merely says, "The biggest tree gets hit by lightning, and bugs chew the prettiest flower" (GB, 43). And so, when Sara later tells Virgil that he is "a good brother," Offutt's phrasing is key. It is clear that to Sara, Virgil is not *the* good brother of the title -- or at least, not yet.

The relationship between Virgil and Abigail proceeds according to her desires, and his reluctance to disrupt the contented stasis of his life. Just as the townspeople expect Virgil to kill Rodale, "for the past four years, everyone in Blizzard figured [Abigail] and Virgil would get married. Virgil went along with the idea" (GB, 39). Unlike Boyd, who was always willing to move himself away from unpleasant situations, Virgil -- like his mother -- is perpetually averse to undertaking

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<sup>61</sup> Indeed, all societies are like this, but as with so many aspects of southern and Appalachian culture, gender differences must be understood in terms of degree: as Lori Robison has written, "the region has been understood to be hotter, more exotic, more mythic, more romantic, more unified, more anachronistic, and more brutal than the rest of the country" (58). Perhaps it would be more useful to apply Cunningham's theory of Appalachia again here: not only are these characteristics more pronounced in Appalachia than in the rest of America, they are also more pronounced here than in the South.

<sup>62</sup> Both Sara and Mrs. Caudill are exempted from an active role in the revenge cycle by virtue of their gender. In Appalachia, it seems that women are never called upon to uphold the honour of the family in the way that men are. This notion is so standard that by excluding allusions to it, Offutt is presenting the exemption as obvious fact. There is never any doubt, beginning with the title of the novel, that because he is the only remaining Caudill male, Virgil must be the one to avenge Boyd's death.

any action that will upset the balance of his life or those around him. He shows respect for Abigail, and defends her to his family: “‘My opinion,’ Virgil said, ‘Abigail’s on the liberated side. She works and takes care of her own car’ ” (GB, 41). Later on that same evening, Virgil notices Abigail in profile, and sees “the silhouette of her powerful chin ... He wondered if she appreciated any of his features as much as he enjoyed that chin” (GB, 43). As with Botree, what Virgil notices about women is never a typically feminine characteristic. Instead, he observes strong hands or powerful chins, which could as easily belong to a man. This insertion of his admiration of masculine (or at the very least, unfeminine) traits underscores a thematic validation of strong women.

Whereas later, in his relationship with Botree, Virgil is attracted to her because of -- not in spite of -- her ability to function independently, his relationship with Abigail is marred by her self-sufficiency. She is “happy, and he resented it.” It was this “quality that always made him feel less of a man” (GB, 43). They share a combative kiss after this revelation, before Abigail imparts her latest bit of good news: “I got a promotion and a raise,” she tells Virgil. “Virgil didn’t know what to say. She already drew a bigger pay check than he did” (GB, 44). Abigail’s solvency, coupled with her capable personality, make it clear that she is the leader in this relationship -- though she retains her femininity by joining the Caudill women in the kitchen. Virgil has merely been trapped in a cycle of perpetual motion but, this night, he wonders “what the cutoff age was to join the army” (GB, 44). After four years of staying with Abigail, he finally begins to think of escape. Later, as he bids her goodbye, Abigail is the only woman who does not profess her love for him. As Virgil tries to encourage her to move on with her life without him, Abigail misinterprets his intentions and accuses him of being unfaithful. In this brief scene, Abigail displays more emotion than any other character in *The Good Brother*; she cries as Virgil tells her, “You’re my best friend.” He wanted to tell her that “he loved her as much as

ever, but he didn't feel it now." To this Virgil, Abigail screams, "Who are you? ... I don't know you anymore. Who are you!" (GB, 112). Offutt places a question mark after the first "who are you," but an exclamation point after the second. The second is thus a phrase of emphasis, a rhetorical statement positioned to show Virgil's incontrovertible retreat from his former self and his former life. The people to whom he has been closest no longer know him, but he has become so transfixed on his escape by this point -- and the murder of Billy Rodale -- that he cannot summon the initiative to return to the comfort of his former life.

Virgil Caudill leaves Kentucky with the image of three women stamped in his mind: his mother, who lived to ease the lives of her husband and sons; his sister, an insufferable gossip who actively tried to enforce traditional ideals of masculinity; and his ex-girlfriend, who may have been "liberated" but ultimately wanted to settle down with Virgil and raise his children. All of these women contribute to a prototypical southern femininity: their gender is performed largely in response to the actions of men, and they believe in the merit of a system that enforces this dynamic.

When Virgil reaches Montana, he is therefore unprepared for the type of woman he encounters, all totally unlike those he has known in Kentucky: first, he meets the woman who works at the tire store, where he "admired the ease with which she handled the heavy rims." She wears a "snap-front shirt ... embroidered with roses" but she still knows "more than he did about truck tires" (GB, 144-5). She is the first woman he sees, and is the first example of a feminine embodiment of masculine traits that Virgil soon comes to realise typifies western females. Virgil is unsure of how to act around these women, especially when he goes to the bar in Missoula. He knows that "men at home usually drank outside, separate from women," but here, "a woman at the bar laughed, spit flying from her mouth. She wore a leather vest and held a cigarette beside her mouth. Her eye was freshly blacked and swollen" (GB, 155). Offutt deliberately posits western women in

opposition to those Virgil has known in Kentucky, choosing language that both negates any femininity they might possess and underscores their affinity for masculine behaviour. This convergence of the genders is alien to Virgil, whose Appalachian experience has clearly emphasised the division of men and women. Not only is he unsure of how he should behave around these western women, he is troubled by his reaction to them.

The night Virgil buys his new gun from the man in a parking lot, he goes to a tavern by Rock Creek, where he is the only customer. It is snowing, and the female bartender makes her attraction to Virgil obvious when she tells him about the “bed in the back” where she usually weathers a storm. The bartender is a confusing mix of male and female: in her first sentence to Virgil, she swears (which is Sara’s definition of liberation), but when she leans forward, Virgil can see “a flash of delicate black lace inside her shirt” (GB, 164). She is straightforward in her speech and her manner, and Virgil realises that “what he wanted was her, but he was afraid, and the fear bothered him, even as it increased his desire” (GB, 165). After an aggressive kiss, Virgil pushes her away, although as soon as he leaves the tavern he “felt ashamed for not staying with the bartender, and wondered if there was something wrong with him” (GB, 166). He is torn between desire and fear, and allows the latter to triumph over the former. Virgil later thinks that he “left because he couldn’t be with a woman until he was sure of who he was” (GB, 166), a statement that echoes his earlier explanation for not proposing marriage to Abigail. Then, he felt that he “couldn’t, although he wanted to. He wouldn’t ask until he knew what held him back in the first place” (GB, 39). With Abigail, he is unsure about his own motives for hesitating, but that later hesitation is ascribed to a crisis of identity. After he meets Botree, both demurrals are resolved; he thinks of Abigail and “abruptly he knew that he had never loved her. At the fore of his feelings lay sympathy. They’d been together because the

community had expected it. He suddenly understood that he'd spent his life following patterns that were designed by other people" (GB, 223).

However, the community in Montana -- or at least, Coop, Owen and Johnny (and the rest of the Bills) -- proves to be as invasive as the one Virgil had abandoned: the Bills all expect Virgil and Botree to form a relationship, and the men vacate the main house in order to give them the privacy to do so. Coming West and interacting with different types of people -- especially women -- than the ones with whom he was familiar in Kentucky have not only enlightened Virgil about specific differences, but have also offered him a clarity previously unavailable. The violence he witnesses in the West is not unlike the violence of Appalachia, the men who stand apart from the women to drink and chat are not unlike the friends he left behind in Kentucky, and Virgil comes to realise what Offutt already knows: that these are regions that breed hard men to hard ways, and are filled with people just trying to get along, to do well for themselves and their families.

Within an Appalachian culture that aligns masculinity with violence, Virgil's own gender identity had become endangered, as he refused to kill Billy Rodale. His eventual decision to enact that murder, the reader assumes, reaffirms his masculine status to his kinsmen, but Virgil's masculinity suffers a similar blow in the West. When he is shot by Johnny, Virgil loses his physical independence and his ability to protect himself; he becomes reliant upon Botree's nursing ministrations for survival -- she feeds him, bathes him, and ensures he gets enough exercise. Ironically, it is not until Virgil gets a job and assumes responsibility for Botree and her young sons that he regains a semblance of a masculine self. He "felt grateful for the patterns of work -- rising early, performing a task, being an equal among men who worked. He appreciated the clear hierarchy of command and duty, the shared sense of responsibility. His presence was needed" (GB, 268). Botree reverts to a more feminine role of wife and mother, and Virgil becomes the provider of the family. The



conclusion of *The Good Brother* witnesses Virgil assuming command of the farm, protecting the weaker members of the family. It is finally in Montana that Virgil is able to discover another version of himself, a latent Boyd-like figure, who takes control and asserts his leadership. In the West, Virgil finds his inner cowboy.

In the first book of Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady Cole discovers, away from home, "a mirror of something unexplored within himself" (Bryant, 223). By leaving Kentucky and settling in Montana, Virgil has offered up every facet of his former life for comparison.<sup>63</sup> "The journey," writes Robert Davis, "can be made only as a result of the act of invention, of discovering where one is and who one imagines oneself to be" (151). It is by experiencing the variations of the landscapes, the traditions and the people of these two places that Virgil is finally able to see a version of himself that is harmonious with his newly-discovered natural impulses. Joe Tiller is not the same man as Virgil Caudill; he is the western personification of attributes that remained buried in his Kentucky self. Offutt's structure of this novel is a seemingly convoluted way of allowing his main character to see a true reflection of his own image -- and it makes a significant contribution to a genre (and indeed, an entire geographical region) that relies on an "Other" for a definition of itself. It is only when Virgil Caudill is stripped of his home, his identity, and his people that he is able to negotiate a explanation of himself that is more genuinely felt than imposed.

### **Good Brothers: Fraternity in the West**

In the course of *The Good Brother*, Offutt presents four pairs of brothers: Boyd and Virgil; Botree's brothers, Owen and Johnny; the two (Z-Man and Kip) Virgil meets at the Independence Day picnic; and finally, Botree's sons, Dallas and

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<sup>63</sup> Virgil Caudill is experiencing his own memoir; in his lifetime, he is able to witness his own life and his demise, learn from it, and move on. The binary structure of *The Good Brother* achieves what *The Same River Twice* could not: closure, self-reflection, and advancement.

Abilene. Owen and Johnny's relationship is hardly fraternal, as Owen assumes the paternal role over Johnny in lieu of their own father. Johnny is treated as a child by everyone, though he has recently become a father himself. Each pair of brothers has a natural leader, and a follower, and each brother's characteristics either qualify or disqualify him from assuming the role of "the good brother."

On the fourth of July, Virgil joins a group of men drinking whisky away from their families. Two men in the circle, Z-Man and Kip, have an obvious rapport, and tease each other good-naturedly. This interchange is distinctly reminiscent of the earlier days in Kentucky, when Virgil shared cheerful abuse with the other men at work. Here in Montana, Johnny says to Virgil, "don't pay them any mind ... they been that way all their lives." Virgil asks, "What are they ... kin?" and Johnny simply replies, "Brothers." In the next paragraph, Offutt writes that "sunlight flared off the truck's chrome bumper. [Virgil] squinted. He felt great. The river glowed in the western light" (GB, 242). Finally, after all these months in Montana, Virgil experiences a positive emotion, and his feeling "great" is a direct result of being part of a familiar community in the West, a feeling largely associated with the friendly banter of a group of men, and the remembrance of his relationship with his own brother.<sup>64</sup>

The youngest pair of brothers -- Botree's sons, Dallas and Abilene -- function as the reincarnation of Boyd and Virgil in the West, and as such, a medium through which Virgil can relive his past. He soon becomes attached to these young brothers, after his initial assessment that they are "good boys" (GB, 200). They are the only characters in *The Good Brother* who speak exactly what is on their minds, without fear of reproach or consequence. Dallas and Abilene wear "small cowboy boots" (GB, 201) and ask questions about lakes, creeks, the moon, and mountains, just as Boyd and Virgil "had spent hours discussing the imagined opinions of a tree, the road, or a cloud" (GB, 55). The sense of logic within Dallas and Abilene is pure, as is

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<sup>64</sup> See Appendix II for a further discussion of male camaraderie.

their affection for and protection of one another. Dallas is older, and the clear leader of the duo; he always speaks first and for his brother. Virgil's interaction with these little boys reminds him of his relationship with Boyd, and as he watches Dallas patiently instruct Abilene, he realises that "Boyd had taught him more than his parents had" (GB, 272). Each time Virgil witnesses the boys playing together, the pattern is the same: he comments that they are (as mentioned) "good boys" or "good little boys" (GB, 253), and then starts to think about Boyd and their childhood together. When Virgil teaches these young brothers how to settle a dispute with a rock and some spit, he reveals -- for the first time since coming to the West -- something about his past, without fear or remorse. He mentions Boyd to Botree and the boys, and after the children become distracted, Botree "looked at him carefully," then said, "I didn't know you had a brother" (GB, 272). The integral component of the novel -- Virgil's murder of Billy Rodale -- is of course a mystery to the second set of characters.

Earlier, Botree had questioned Virgil about his past, and accused him of having another woman somewhere else. He denied it, only explaining that "there's something, all right, but not that" (GB, 235). Virgil's "something" is Boyd and the murder of Billy Rodale; the past that he needs to conceal is the same past that he most wants to reveal. After Botree becomes aware of Boyd's existence, the elder Caudill's memory seems at once closer and more elusive to Virgil. In the final sentence of this chapter, Offutt writes of Boyd that "long after he'd quit hunting deer, he'd still tracked them every year, hoping to touch one in the woods" (GB, 272). By allowing Botree to be privy to an element of his past, Virgil brings his memories closer to his present. Even though those memories cannot co-exist comfortably with his life in Montana, they must remain at the front of his consciousness. Virgil has "quit" thinking he can revisit Kentucky, but -- like Boyd tracking the deer in the woods -- he will continue to revisit his old memories, hoping to catch a glimpse of

his former life. The arrival of Billy Rodale's cousin, Orben Stargill, in the Montana woods is as close as Virgil comes to touching his deer, his past.

The final few paragraphs of *The Good Brother* describe Virgil's surrender to government forces but, in actuality, he is surrendering to a future about which he is unsure, but necessarily hopeful. He bends down "to retrieve a child's mitten on the floor. It was blue with a hole in the palm, like a pair he'd shared with his brother" (GB, 316). Virgil remembers "hunting a Christmas tree for their grade school" with Boyd as children. "They had shared a pair of gloves, one apiece, each keeping the bared hand in a pocket" (GB, 79). The fraternal bond that linked him with Boyd is the same bond that links Dallas and Abilene; it is this bond that transports his past into his future, as Virgil and Boyd metamorphose into Dallas and Abilene. Through these two young brothers, and as long as Virgil remains close to them and their mother, he can maintain a tenuous link to his brother.

The novel's search for *the* good brother cannot be wholly satisfied by any of its adult figures. Boyd is suggested to be the better of the two Caudill brothers, at first -- or at least, the one universally liked and the protector of his younger brother. Ultimately, though, Boyd is a man unable to deal with the death of his father, and so creates a dualistic lifestyle for himself; on one side, he once again becomes a child, his mother's best son, but on the other, he uses alcohol and recklessness -- not to "improve reality," as he says, but escape. Virgil is, as Sara says, *a* good brother -- but he cannot be *the* good brother. Ironically, in Appalachian tradition, he would become a good brother upon killing Billy Rodale; certainly, though, outside these circumstances and this environment, the term "good" would never be ascribed to a murderer. Herein lies the ironical element of Offutt's title: the actual, integral goodness of the main character is removed as soon as he becomes "good" in the eyes of his community. Is there then, in fact, *any* good brother in this novel?

Neither Owen nor Johnny qualify; Owen because of his pugilistic allegiances to a ridiculous political movement, and Johnny because (even though he tries to be good) he has shot one man and killed another. The other adult brothers in the novel, Z-Man and Kip, are not enough of a presence to determine goodness. The fourth pair of brothers, then, whose role could be construed as mere augmentation of the Botree character, evolve into a position of greater significance. In this novel that emphasises the fact that the escape of history is impossible, and that everything is cyclical, these two little boys become not just symbols of Botree's wild younger days, but the good *brothers*. In Dallas and Abilene, Virgil will be able to recreate his past in his future, an opportunity to avoid the mistakes of his own relationship with his brother, Boyd. From the detritus of all the potential good brothers -- who have failed -- come two little boys whose goodness has not been yet destroyed.

### **The Exploration of the Western Mythology in *The Good Brother***

Upon arriving in the West, Joe Tiller (as Virgil Caudill now calls himself) actively participates in creating his own version of the western myth. Offutt writes: "He enjoyed a physical sense of insignificance. The landscape had an inviting quality, seductive but lethal ... He was free" (GB, 124, 122). So begins the first of three phases Joe goes through in the West; in this phase, Joe enjoys the apparent freedom of the land, relishing in the success of his escape, and attempting to fit in with the locals. As he drives into Montana, he is passed by "a four-door pickup ... driven by a young man wearing a western hat ... In the rear window hung a lasso with a pair of baby shoes dangling in the center of the coil" (GB, 124). Gone is Offutt's suspicion of people "pretending" to be cowboys (as in *The Same River Twice*); here, Joe Tiller views the western hat and lasso as part of an authentic western patina. Joe feels "bad for the crew who'd built the road, but [is] deeply

envious of the man who'd laid it out. It was the harshest land he'd ever seen" (GB, 124). Joe might not imagine himself as a Daniel Boone-like figure, but he nonetheless enters the West with admiration for the land and an earnest optimism in his ability to carve out a new identity for himself.

Before long, though, Joe progresses from this first phase -- where he buys a snakeskin belt to feel "closer to belonging in the West" (GB, 132) -- to the second, which centres upon his growing disillusionment with the totality of the western myth. He begins to realise that the West (much like the physical structure of the narrative) is divided into two halves, and he does not fit into either one. As already mentioned, there are the Old Westers, those hardy men and women who live in general isolation and view the western landscape as an entity that must be subdued in order to guarantee survival. Conversely, there are also the New Westers, who have come to the West in search of a simpler, more traditional lifestyle. Too often, though, the New Westers are interested only in the façade of the western lifestyle, and are viewed with suspicion and distaste by the original westerners. The New Westers are blamed for the disruption of a previously peaceful existence, and are disdained for motivations unsympathetic to the western ideology. As forest fires rage over Montana, the base commander explains to Joe that the fires -- a necessary part of forest management -- are no longer allowed to burn properly, because of all the expensive houses in the fire's potential path. The commander dryly declares, "No real Montanan builds a fancy home in the woods" (GB, 271). A "real" Montanan, as this Blackfoot Indian makes clear, does not view the landscape aesthetically; he utilises it to ensure his own survival.

Joe Tiller, not long in Missoula, personally witnesses the contiguity of the New and Old West on a town street:

A tall woman wearing a fur coat and high heels emerged from an espresso shop. She sat sideways in a sports car, swiveled her legs into its plush interior, and drove away. Seconds later, a young man holding a straight razor backed out of a bar, forced by an older man who gripped the kid's wrist. In a deft

motion, the man disarmed the kid and sent him stumbling against a parked car.(GB, 132)

Side by side, two worlds exist. The woman with the espresso can only be situated in a contemporary atmosphere, but the young man could just as easily have been evicted from a saloon in the days of the Wild West. *This* is what the West is today: an environment still unbounded by rules, but now the lack of rules extends temporally. Historically, the West welcomed everyone -- or at least was large enough to anonymously accommodate all who chose to reside there. Now, the West's vastness encompasses not only various people, but various *eras*, as well. The West remains more than ever a land where Americans may go to be free -- because they are not only free to choose their lifestyle, but the timeframe in which they experience it. A man who goes West in search of his traditional manhood will no doubt find it, alongside gun racks, cattle ranches and bars called "The Wolf." The West is the ultimate *American* landscape -- in the original idea of the nation -- because it exists and functions in the image in which people see it.

Virgil Caudill, in going West, is attempting to cleanse himself of the crime he committed in Kentucky. He is not merely fleeing the scene of that crime, though; he is trying to regress to a time before the crime even occurred. Offutt writes that Joe "couldn't remember if the time in Kentucky was earlier or later than Montana" (GB, 160). The time, of course, is earlier -- to go West, literally, is to go back in time. Great Falls, Montana reminds the narrator of "Tough People" (in *Out of the Woods*) "of towns in Kentucky that hadn't changed since the fifties" (OW, 162). Virgil does not want to go back an hour or two, though, and so has adopted the identity of a child -- an innocent, who had had no opportunity to do wrong in his short lifetime. Joe's gestation in his first winter in the secluded cabin in the Montana woods serves as his short childhood, and he is reborn in the spring as a man willing to commit the sort of acts he had once tried so hard to avoid. Virgil found the concept of revenge alien in

Kentucky, but in Montana, Joe understands the impulse to protect -- violently, if necessary -- what little he can call his. This is the great irony of *The Good Brother* -- although it is an irony that firmly aligns Offutt with the other southern authors who have written of the West -- that in going West, Virgil Caudill has become more traditionally 'southern' than he ever was.

Thus, Joe Tiller enters his third phase of life in Montana. He remains suspicious about the members of his new community, but the feeling of *belonging* dilutes this. Whereas he had previously felt that the West "was not his world," (GB, 147), Joe now feels "offered a solace he'd never found at home" (GB, 241). Joe comes from the comforting, protective landscape of hills and valleys, an enclosed space that embraces its inhabitants. Now, Joe revels in "the valley ... before him, calming him with its vast presence of space and light. The landscape instilled a tremendous sense of loyalty, and he understood the desire to defend it" (GB, 291). What had previously been frightening has become soothing, and so even though the West is not exactly what Virgil Caudill had expected, it has taught him to seek out happiness where he is, rather than flee in constant expectation of better things to come.

In both his fiction and non-fiction, Offutt uses the West as a tangible point of comparison for the author's native Kentucky. His perpetual peregrinations in and out of the South shadow his maturation, and the evolution of his feelings about his home. Offutt leaves Kentucky as a teenager with one thought: freedom. He returns, often, not only because he does not feel freed by his wanderings, but because he misses home. The author's first memoir, *The Same River Twice*, is ostensibly about his quest for freedom, identity, and his journey towards fatherhood. His latest autobiography, *No Heroes: A Memoir of Coming Home*, concerns his desire to help his deprived Kentuckians, and to carve out a viable lifestyle for himself and his family in his home state.



Chris Offutt's portrayal of the American West firmly plants him at the epicentre of one of southern literature's most modern movements. Part of a culture and a literature that have undergone significant change within his lifetime, Offutt's contributions to the advancement of the genre marry the concerns of both. *The Same River Twice* and *The Good Brother* are snapshots of a living cultural history, one that is excited by the innovations of modernisation and nostalgic for bygone eras. Richard Gray, in his afterword to *Dixie Debates* (1996) entitled "Negotiating Differences: Southern Culture(s) Now," writes that "if there is change within continuity, then there is also continuity within change" (221). This idea epitomises contemporary southern literature: authors struggle with the desire to provide fresh material, versus the need to preserve the traditions of the canon that make it uniquely southern. The movement westward -- and Chris Offutt's own journey through western America -- proves that though the gaps in regional culture are constricting, their disparities are sufficient to propagate rich, divergent literatures.

## Chapter 7

### I Don't Hate It: Place and Placelessness in Southern Literature

In an article decrying the anthologisation of postmodern southern texts, Julius Rowan Raper writes of the destructive nature of the quintessentially southern story, the “sense of place.” He asserts that “[l]oyalty to place is a double-edged sword, all blade, without a hilt to hold, as sure to wound the wielder as anyone” (6). Raper prefaces this statement with a consideration of modern southern fiction’s debt to William Faulkner, and the legacy of Quentin Compson. After the publication of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), critics of southern literature adopted the traditional “Hamlet question” and created its southern version: the widely-noted “Quentin problem.” Quentin Compson’s now-famous journey, from Yoknapatawpha County to Harvard, forced an introspection of the southern literary canon; the characteristically unerring devotion to place -- that is, the *southern* place -- underwent the challenge of deracination and its accompanying interrogation of the displaced character’s relationship with his home place. Raper’s image of the double-edged sword of loyalty to place encapsulates Quentin’s problem: the inherent dangers of enforced devotion to a place. This is the problem that has, further, perplexed many twentieth-century critics of southern literature (as well as its authors and indeed, southerners in general); as such, the debate surrounding the southern “sense of place” has found validation as its own subcategory of critical thought.

The decidedly ambiguous cast to the consensus, however, echoes the ideas of Michael Kowalewski, who writes that we “lack a vocabulary with which to ask engaging philosophical, psychological or aesthetic questions about what it means to dwell in a place, whether actually or imaginatively” (174). This chapter will examine the chronology of southern literature’s internal argument over its prescribed “sense

of place,” and consider contemporary southern fiction’s progression from Quentin Compson’s original, much-discussed statement of fealty towards the South: “I don’t hate it.” Perhaps it is only through a retrospective lens that we can create a vocabulary that encompasses the philosophy, psychology, and aesthetic considerations of southern places.

The following chapter will discuss Chris Offutt’s relationship with his home place, as experienced by the characters of his second collection of short stories, *Out of the Woods*. They have all been displaced, and each story negotiates their homecoming, be it physical or ideological.

### **A Wandering People is More or Less a Barbaric People: The Origins of the Sense of Place in Southern Literature**

Introducing their expansive text on the varied aspects of the South’s relationship with place, entitled *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture* (2002), Sharon Monteith and Suzanne Jones note that “Louis D. Rubin Jr. ... adjudges that a ‘firm identification with a Place’ is a defining trope of southern literature” (3). In his contribution to the text, Scott Romine identifies Rubin’s role in the establishment of the field of southern literary criticism in general, via the publication of his 1953 work, *Southern Renaissance* (which was co-authored by Robert D. Jacobs). Rubin’s contribution to the creation of the southern canon authenticates his subsequent declaration of the centrality of place to that genre. Of greater importance, however, is the notion that “sense of place” and the field of southern literary criticism became prominent in tandem, suggesting that the field itself is synonymous with the conceptualisation of place. Study of southern literature, then, cannot be extricated from its focus on the importance of place. Such study raises several vital questions: Why is *place*, specifically, regarded as the cornerstone

of the southern literary psyche? How was the concept of place originally conceived? Is southern literature's treatment of place reflective of that of southern culture -- and is that even an important question to ask? And, finally, how has the southern sense of place evolved throughout the latter half of the twentieth century?

1953 then marks the inception of southern literary criticism, in general, and the accompanying attention to a sense of place, in particular, though this 1950s development rested itself largely in part upon the earlier work of the Agrarians. Martyn Bone, author of *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (2005), contends that "even now, the standard southern literary-critical conception of 'place' derives substantially from the Agrarians' idealized vision of a rural, agricultural society" (vii).<sup>65</sup> The Agrarian influence on the conceptualisation of place in southern literature is often acknowledged but only recently has it been disseminated. Bone devotes much attention to the fiscal manifestation of cultural devotion to the mythology of the southern landscape; he writes that the Agrarians "were against industrialization, urbanization, and land speculation," which derived from "the modern economy of industrial and financial capitalism" (6). The Agrarian commitment to southern places was bound up in their fierce opposition to the expansion (and, to their minds, pillaging) of other American locales. The delay of the South's cultural expansion -- as it is "a little behind" the rest of the country -- made a vital contribution to the preservation of a pastoral way of life that the Agrarians deemed essential to southern cultural identity. Indeed, writes Richard Weaver, it is a "blessing that the South has never had much money, [because] it has retarded the spoiling of the South" (quoted in Bone, 26). The Agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, incorporated the authors' observations of industrialism's influence on the rest of the United States, taking full advantage of the South's so-called 'retardation' and attempting to provide a barricade against the predicted onslaught of modernism. The

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<sup>65</sup> For the purposes of my argument here, I refer only to "place" in terms of its literary-critical heritage, and not as a formalised theoretical concept.

focus of this manifesto -- as suggested by the name of the group -- was nostalgia for the traditional South, in which land occupied a vital role in both economy and culture.

The Agrarian 'sense of place' -- what southern literature calls the "traditional" sense of place -- is always evaluative. The original connotation of this phrase involves absolute fealty to determinedly southern places, utter commitment to the superiority of the southern landscape. Literature of the southern renaissance reflects this commitment, but the *necessity* of a positive evaluation of the South is a reflection of the region's political relationship with the American centre. Barbara Ladd points out in her contribution to *South to a New Place*, an essay entitled "Dismantling the Monolith: Southern Places -- Past, Present, and Future," that "sense of place suggests something that "centers" ... so that the literatures of the periphery are often said to be "centered" in that famous "sense of place," whereas those literatures of the "center" are presumably unplaced" (45). In the absence of physical occupation of a "center," then, the presumption of a philosophical uniformity functions as a centralising entity. The South's gradual relegation to the periphery, after its auspicious beginnings in the United States, precipitated an associated socio-cultural uncertainty. Southern literary theory's overwhelmingly eschatological leanings no doubt emanate from this uncertainty; Diane Roberts notes astutely that "the South has always been disappearing, or about to disappear" (363). The origins of the traditional southern "sense of place," I would argue, are intrinsically linked to the South's perpetual fear of eradication. Factors that have historically defined southernness have lacked sustainability; what is constant is the physical geography upon which ideological conflict has been mapped. The southern "sense of place" is thus the natural reaction to cultural tumult; in periods of uncertainty, southerners turn to the permanence of the land, and superimpose an ideology on that bedrock. From that 1950s moment of inception, authors of southern literature were required to

represent their home place favourably, in a literary attempt to guard against the loss of yet another component of southern culture.

Eudora Welty's lecture, "Place in Fiction," was delivered several times in the latter half of the 1950s, and forms the basis of many arguments for the sanctity of place in southern literature. In the first section of his analysis of southern place and its transformation, *Remapping Southern Literature* (2000), Robert Brinkmeyer often quotes Welty, and credits her with a devotion to place that is in strong synchrony with the Agrarians'. He notes that there are "plenty of journeys in Welty's fiction, but the most significant of these are internal;" he goes on to quote Welty, as she asserts that "It is through place that we put out roots ... where those roots reach toward ... is the deep and running vein, eternal and consistent and everywhere pure itself, that feeds and is fed by the human understanding." Brinkmeyer's analysis of these words of Welty's encapsulates the aura of the traditionally southern "sense of place": "To be in constant motion is to experience only surfaces; to remain in place is to plumb depths" (15, Welty 133). "A Southern sense of place, of course," writes Brinkmeyer, "implies not mobility but stasis; one can only celebrate place if one is "in place" -- that is, settled and rooted" (14). Brinkmeyer's pointed sentences relay the ethos of southern literature in the early and middle parts of the twentieth-century, wherein southern identity was precariously reliant upon self-propagandisation. The original "sense of place" emphasises the necessity of stasis, of remaining in place in order to achieve maximal intimacy with it. The epigraph of Brinkmeyer's volume, however, is another Welty quote from "Place in Fiction," although this one seems ideologically contradictory to the thesis of her lecture. She writes, "For the artist to be unwilling to move, mentally or spiritually or physically, out of the familiar is a sign that spiritual timidity or poverty or decay has come upon him; for what is familiar will then have turned into all that is tyrannical."<sup>66</sup> Brinkmeyer employs this notion of intellectual

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<sup>66</sup> This quote, as I already mentioned in the Introduction, also acts as a provocation for future generations of southern writers. In this chapter, I use Welty's words to illustrate the dangers of remaining in one *physical* location, but in general terms, the southern writer must be willing to

fearlessness to justify the specific trend among some southern writers to situate their texts in the American West, but Welty's tenacity foretold the second iteration of the general southern literary community's relationship with place, one that has expanded to include not merely devotion to place, but an ideological excursion into precisely what that devotion entails.

### **It's One Thing to Have a Life in a Place, and to be Happy in it is Quite Another: The Evolution of the Sense of Place**

The southern relationship with place can always been examined through the lens of "stasis," which is invariably situated in opposition to "mobility." The connotation of these terms is inextricably linked to a specific historical and literary moment. The potency of the southern "sense of place" made "stasis" both comfortable and nurturing, as well as a basis from which one could thoroughly examine all aspects of life and culture. Conversely, "mobility" connotes rootlessness and aimless wandering, in the original sense of southern place. Brinkmeyer asserts that "movement itself ... is characteristically viewed with distrust and suspicion," and further, that "Agrarians found [explorers and pioneers] to be the embodiment of selfish individualism, destructive expansionism, and never-satisfied wanderlust" (14, 8). Gradually, though, the southern "sense of place" shifted to diametrically opposed associations of "stasis" and "mobility;" whereas stasis had once been evaluated as wholly positive, more contemporary ideas of the term encompass Welty's concept of the tyrannical. Equally, later idealisations of "mobility" expanded to include notions of freedom and autonomy.

Such an emphatic alteration of the defining terms of an integral component of southern literary ideology, then, must surely be indicative of an underlying cultural shift. Brinkmeyer attributes southern literature's diminishing devotion to place to the

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undertake a *metaphorical* journey.

onslaught of cultural homogeneity in the latter half of the twentieth century. Theoretically, increased prosperity in the urban South drove southerners out of rural areas and into cities; and technology made intra-American travel easier and communication speedier, allowing unprecedented access to previously-alien lifestyles and influences. With an increased awareness of varying American cultures, it would seem, distinctive “regional identity,” after the second World War, “is waning” (Brinkmeyer, 25). Can southern literature’s ensuing departure from the sense of blind loyalty to place be wholly a result of such concrete factors as globalisation and improved technology? Or, does southern literature exist in what Scott Romine terms a “referential vacuum,” ensuring that contemporary writers’ re-evaluation of their duty to southern places is entirely a reaction to other factors contained *within* the canon?

Southern *cultural* identity is indeed not the same as southern *literary* identity, and recent critics such as Romine and Michael Kreyling have questioned the degree to which the Agrarian obfuscation of this distinction was intentional. Kreyling, certainly, argues that the Agrarians “manipulated ... images” and relied on “myth” in order to “control representation of the South at a specific historical moment” (Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature*, 5, Romine, 29). Kreyling further contends that “southern literary history ... has portrayed the [Agrarians] ... as free from ideological fashioning and inclination rather than steeped in both” (6); his scepticism at the accepted historical perspective is apparent. Kreyling does not refer specifically to the so-called southern “sense of place,” but his assertions are important nonetheless: Is one of the primary theoretical concepts behind southern literature (the “sense of place”) merely a socio-political construct of a group of academics intent on “fighting back” against the disenfranchisement of their academic niche? Or is southern literature’s sense of place, in fact, exactly what the Agrarians claimed it to be -- a “natural” component of southern culture? Significantly, Scott Romine asks,



“But what if “place” and “region” are effects, not causes, of representation? What if southern literature is determined by southern literature, not by “the South itself” (38)?

Romine answers the majority of these questions affirmatively: “There is no place, no South, there to imitate,” he writes, “only previous imitations of place there to parody;” he claims further that “ideology derives from stories, not the other way around” (40, 39). The question that these critics seem intent on asking, though, is simply: “Are southerners really devoted to a sense of place, or is it entirely a literary construct?” Perhaps the answer is less convoluted than the length of Romine’s essay might suggest -- perhaps, like when trying to determine whether an autobiography is fact or fiction, the *reality* that is so desperately sought is rendered obsolete. In his personal essay about the essence of place, George Garrett suggests that “sometimes imaginary history, and at its heart an imaginary sense of place, not only haunts our lives with ghostly voices and echoes, but is, finally, stronger, even more accurate than the cut, shuffled and dealt world of hard facts” (419). The mythology of place, and therefore the mythology’s residence in southern literature, is more important than a determination of “real” southerners’ sense of place. Barbara Ladd writes that while “the *experience* of place remains dynamic and vital,” the theorisation of it is problematic (51); such problems only arise when there is an attempt to reduce the mythological to the concrete. Even so, in *The Social Psychology of Sectionalism* (1983), John Shelton Reed polled southerners’ attitudes towards their home region. When asked to describe the “*best* thing about the South,” respondents listed “climate, its forests, mountains, or coast, its lack of crowding and pollution, the opportunities it offers for outdoor recreation,” as well as its “roominess” and “wide open spaces” (39-40).

The mythology, then, of the southern “sense of place” is indeed self-referential, in the very manner that Romine seems to fear so much. His

apprehensions find basis in Roland Barthes' declaration that "myths ... require literal reference as 'nourishment,'" and he foresees a twenty-first century southern literature that will "dispense with reality altogether," wherein "the identitarian South may inflect representation long after the material South has retired into memory" (41, 43, 42). Inasmuch as the "sense of place" is an integral myth of southern literature, and functions vitally therein, the grim future that Romine and others predict for southern literature presupposes that the "sense of place" is *only* a myth. A more reasonable vocabulary, to respond to Kowalewski's despairing cry, emphasises the reciprocal nature of a relationship between the mythology of place and the tangible physicality of the southern landscape. The myth of southern place, after all, could not and cannot exist without contemporary acknowledgement of the importance of the southern land to previous generations of southerners.

A more carefully considered explanation of the evolving sense of place must consider it a response to southern literary theory's persistent prediction of the imminent expiration of the South and its literature. If the traditional southern sense of place is viewed as a response to the threat of cultural eradication -- assuming that internally vociferous affirmation of southern places will aid in the preservation of the South as a whole -- then the more recent questioning of that tradition is in itself a testament to the region's perpetuity. Southern writers, who had previously felt the need to use their sense of place as a literary sandbagging against the floodwaters of cultural homogenisation, may now have realised that the long-predicted Judgement Day has never arrived -- and, more importantly, will likely never arrive. Southern culture and literature have proved hardier than theorists of the Renaissance period imagined, and the continuing cultural distinctiveness displayed by the South -- in spite of globalisation and improved technology -- suggests a relatively new faith in the permanence of the region.

From this more stable base, southern writers have a new freedom with which to explore -- rather than blindly submit to -- their relationship with their home place. It seems apparent at this stage that southern literature will continue to exist, regardless of individual writers' determination that their relationship with the South is not entirely positive. As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, George Garrett wrote that in order "to do their work, Faulkner and Welty and Warner and Foote and Settle and all the rest had to love the place. Deeply ... I doubt seriously that we will again see that kind of love shining through American writing ... We will ... see something else ... but never that true, unconditional love again" (420). Perhaps Garrett is correct in his estimation of the future of writing from the American South -- but it is more likely that the fault lies not within contemporary writers, but within the ideals of blind devotion, of "unconditional love." Surely, to question the nature of a place and then to remain there is a more rousing endorsement of that place than absolute fidelity? Surely, contemporary southern literature's close examination of the traditional sense of place produces (and will continue to produce) a self-awareness that can only heighten the quality of its literature?<sup>67</sup>

In their 1983 text devoted to the philosophical exploration of the rhizome, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari expound Welty's literary call-to-arms; they invite writers to "expand your own territory by deterritorialization," and it is with this quotation that Suzanne Jones and Sharon Monteith chose to begin *South to a New Place*. This is the new southern sense of place, one that emphasises the value of a distanced perspective in order to achieve clarity and reinvigorate inspiration. The demise predicted for the southern sense of place at the hands of globalisation -- the fear that the already-peripheral South would be eradicated altogether -- has instead evolved into a new southern relationship with place, one that views regional

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<sup>67</sup> As I discussed in the Introduction, Garrett's eulogy for southern literature is not ascribable merely to the southern sense of place, but to all facets of this genre. The contemporary southerner's challenged devotion to place and to tradition is a purer kind of love than previous generations' blind faith in the sanctity of the South.

boundaries as important markers of distinction, but not impenetrable limitations to creative scope. As such, southern writers' newly-formed sense of place, with its acceptance of mobility and excursion, neatly releases what had once been defined according to its limits, and provides opportunity for a theoretical concept to transcend the corresponding limitations of its mythical status. Barbara Ladd despairs of the paralysis of spatial fealty, asking, "Is there any sense in which place can *function*, can become *viable* or even *dynamic* and *vital*, a *vehicle* or *engine* for *desiring*, in contemporary literary studies?" (56). Perhaps this is the inevitable legacy of contemporary southern literature's contemplation of place: that it *function* as a single -- yet vital -- formative element of the southern psyche, without eradicating other, equally vital components.

### **Modernity is About the Dream of Always Transcending Limits:**

#### **Contemporary Southern Writers and Their Places**

Bobbie Ann Mason noted in a 1987 interview that "in the older generation, there was a much stronger sense of the place of the South, sense of the family, and sense of the land ... I guess the newer writers are writing about how that sense has been breaking down" (Wilhelm, 272). The southern interaction with place has not diminished, we should note, but contemporary literature's acceptance of troubled relationships among writers and places has produced a fuller, more vivid, and more diverse portrait of southern places, one that complements a burgeoning diversity in southern culture. The Quentin Problem, however, is no closer to being resolved today than it was in 1936; southern writers still both love and hate the South, and their efforts reflect the history of the southern sense of place as well as provide a contemporary snapshot of the limitations that place can impose.

In considerations of southern literature's ideological deterritorialisation, several authors appear frequently, heralded as examples of either the advantages of freeing oneself from pre-existing literary shackles, or the dangers of deracination. Richard Ford, born in 1944 in Jackson, Mississippi, found success with the publication of his Frank Bascombe novels, all set in New Jersey; critics of Ford go so far as to rescind his southernness, while his champions contend that, like Mason, he has been able to transfer his southern sensibilities to an external canvas. *The Lay of the Land* (2006) is the final instalment in the Bascombe series; the New Jersey realtor's ruminations over the nature of home demonstrate precisely the contemporary southern writer's anxiety over his enforced loyalty to a home place. He asks, "What is home then ... The place you first see daylight, or the place you choose for yourself? Or is it the someplace you just can't keep from going back to, though the air there's grown less breathable, the future's over, where they really don't want you back, and where you once left on a breeze without a rearward glance?" (14).

The role of the realtor (estate agent) in contemporary literature neatly allegorises the "breakdown" of the southern sense of place, at least according to several pessimistic theorists. Michael O'Brien writes: "Southerners are devoted to place, it is said. Yet Southerners have left the region with abandon, and moved within the region at a dizzying pace ... Southern realtors are not noticeably impoverished" (216). O'Brien, it would seem, is a philosophical contemporary of the more cynical Agrarians; his flippant and inaccurate remarks underscore a traditional suspicion, one that rejects a fluid sense of place in favour of the static. Of Frank Bascombe's occupation, Martyn Bone comments that he "finally achieves a sophisticated understanding of capitalist property relations, not least the fetishization of "place" as a commodity -- a process which ... has parallels to the fetishization of place in southern literary studies" (xi). It is entirely too simplistic to interpret Frank Bascombe's occupation as the commoditisation of that which had once been

“sacramental” to southerners; contemporary southern literature dictates that a place that “you choose for yourself” is necessarily bestowed with a greater sense of loyalty than that which has been pre-selected as one’s home place (Conyers, 104). Estate agents thus function as the enablers of a new southern sense of place, and instead of reflecting a paucity of spiritual location, they actually present a greater understanding of the vital role that choice can play in one’s emotional connection with a place.

As frequently as contemporary southern writers send their fictional characters on a journey to discover their place, they also write personally about the impact that their home places have had upon their lives. In his 1998 memoir, *All Over But the Shoutin’*, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Rick Bragg recalls his brother, Sam’s, confusion over his decision to leave Alabama. “To Sam,” writes Bragg, “no one lived away from these pines, by choice. I am still not sure who is right and who is wrong, or if there is even a right and wrong to it” (215).<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Larry Brown writes in his 2001 collection of autobiographical stories, *Billy Ray’s Farm*, that he had “lived almost ten years of my early life beside a railroad track in Memphis, and I never stopped longing to live in Mississippi, where I was born, and to be in the country, a place like this” (9). The sentiments of these two men are hardly anomalous among their contemporaries, and are only remarkable in relation to their predecessors’ remarks about their home places. The comments of Bragg and Brown highlight yet another issue in the argument about the sense of place: the degree to which poverty limits one’s choices. Poor southerners have traditionally not had the luxury of being able to remain in their home place (as in the case of Harry Crews’ family), having had to venture out in search of employment and money. This forced displacement, however, has only served to strengthen the southern sense of place; those who have had to leave are generally more anxious to return home. Contemporary southern literature -- much of which is written by poor southerners -- often reflects the

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<sup>68</sup> Though Bragg’s family moved house fairly often during his childhood, they always remained in Alabama. “Home,” then, for Bragg, must be understood as his home region, not a specific home place.

heightened trauma of leaving one's home place under duress, and the psychological effects of displacement. Indeed, writes Offutt in "Target Practice" (in *Out of the Woods*), "the dream of all Kentuckians in Detroit was to come home for good" (OW, 142).

The following chapter focuses on Offutt's second collection of short stories, *Out of the Woods* (1999), and ponders the "sense of place" embodied by the characters within. They have all left Kentucky at some stage, and must now confront the ways in which their lives have been affected by this displacement. More pointedly, Offutt uses their deracination as a means through which these characters may carefully consider the importance of their home places.

## Chapter 8

### **We Just Wanted to Be Free: *Out of the Woods* and the Duelling Perils of Displacement and Immobility**

In her first novel, *Wise Blood* (1952), Flannery O'Connor depicts Hazel Motes' return from Army service and his subsequent discovery that his family home has been abandoned. O'Connor writes, "Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no longer good unless you can get away from it;" it is this passage that Chris Offutt chooses as the epigraph for his second collection of short stories, *Out of the Woods* (1999). Hazel Motes is forced into a contemplation of his home place only when he returns to find its permanence ruptured; such contemplation, however, for the characters in the eight stories of *Out of the Woods*, is, conversely, the result of their active *displacement*. They have all wandered away from home in search of an elusive freedom, but this collection, contrary to what Offutt's introductory use of O'Connor's words might suggest, is not concerned with the mythologised nature of the "home place." Rather, the varied journeys of these characters encapsulate the evolution of the "sense of place" so frequently explored in southern literature.

Through an explication of both the dangers of displacement and of abject immobility, Offutt emphasises the contemporary appropriation of dualistic perspectives. O'Connor's notion -- that "where you are is no longer good unless you can get away from it" -- foretold the future of southern literature, wherein the treatment of one of its founding principles would gradually transcend its original limitations in favour of a more contemplative relationship with place. The metaphoric journeys of *Out of the Woods* -- like those of Hazel Motes or Quentin



Compson -- capture the specific contemporary movement, while maintaining fealty to southern places.

All of the stories in *Out of the Woods* deal overtly with present and past journeys from Appalachia, and the subsequent revelations about the characters' connections to that place. The majority of these pieces, however, have law enforcement and imprisonment as their backdrop. None of Offutt's characters takes up permanent residence in jail, but (with the exception of the characters in the final two stories) they all visit it, contemplate having been there, or foresee an inevitable future stay. Offutt's inclusion of these elements is a subtle rebuke of the traditionally southern "sense of place," which emphasises the comforting effects of remaining in place. In doing so, he creates an alternate hypothesis of place, one that carefully considers "the deep split in the American psyche between staying put or moving on" (Grove, 135). The South of Offutt's generation -- or more specifically, the Appalachia of his adulthood -- no longer remains in complete isolation from the rest of the United States. The ability to travel freely within and without Appalachia is now a reality, and *Out of the Woods* reflects traditional concerns of deracination while acknowledging that what was once comforting also has the potential to stifle. The author uses the jail as an omnipresent reminder of the dangers of immobility. To remain in place, without benefit of ever having left, is as stifling as the literal imprisonment facing the characters of *Out of the Woods*.

### **They Continued to Live as They Always Had: "Melungeons" as the Triple Other**

Ephraim Goins, the deputy and jailer in the story "Melungeons" shares kinship with Ray, of "Target Practice:" both are once self-exiled Kentuckians who have returned to their native region. These men, however, have not come home; Ray

lives a mile away from his childhood home, and Goins remains in the safety of town, within walking distance of the deep hollows of home. Goins has not returned there since the Korean War, but the hills to the east are an omnipresent reminder of his past. In this collection of stories about Kentuckians who have left home, Offutt describes both the difficulties of a life in Appalachia and the constant desire to be reunited -- geographically and ideologically -- with that culture. The paltry physical distance that separates Ray and Goins' from their roots signifies that the chasm dividing home from the external world is *always* an ideological one; geographical separation is the physical manifestation of an ideological estrangement.

In "Melungeons," Offutt employs the legend of these fabled Melungeon people to illustrate the divide between Appalachians and other Americans. *Kentucky Straight*, published in 1992, accentuates Appalachia's cultural fealty to the past, and Offutt's second memoir, *No Heroes* (2002), speaks frankly about the author's concerns over an unwanted cultural evolution. In the intervening years, Offutt wrote the stories that appear in *Out of the Woods*; the author's decision to situate these characters away from their insular region reads as a eulogy for a culture slowly ebbing through the equally destructive elements of globalism and the interstate highway. If Appalachians in general are depicted as the reincarnation of the past in the present, then the Melungeons are the ghosts that haunt that past.<sup>69</sup> Melungeons, according to lore, "lived deep in the hills, on the most isolated ridges;" they had "always lived there" and "continued to live as they always had" (OW, 43). As Appalachians have been demonised in American culture, the Melungeons are the elected ghosts of a lost Appalachian history: "If you don't get up on time," the teacher had said, "the Melungeons will get you" (OW, 43). Much of the interest in this peculiar clan in the past decade centres upon its spurious genetic heritage;

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<sup>69</sup> The reader will recall Offutt's earlier description of the Melungeons, in *Kentucky Straight*'s "Smokehouse": "Melungeons lived deepest in the hills, were the finest trackers and hunters. They were already there when the European settlers arrived. Melungeons weren't black, white, or Indian, and they didn't know where they'd come from" (94).

Melungeons are generally considered to be an amalgam of sub-Saharan African, mixed European, and Native American. For example, the article that Goins has saved from the Lexington newspaper contends that Melungeons “were descendants of Madoc, a Welsh explorer in the twelfth century ... [or] shipwrecked Portuguese, Phoenicians, Turks, or one of Israel’s lost tribes” (OW, 51). Their murky genealogy accompanies a reputation for feuding that underwrites Appalachia’s own chequered and violent past. Rodger Cunningham’s description of Appalachia as “the internal Other to the South as the South is the internal Other of America” (1996: 45) can also be applied to the Melungeons, though Cunningham would no doubt find them to be the Triple Other of America. Removed from Appalachia as it is removed from the South, and as the South is removed from America, the Melungeons are the marginalised people of a marginalised people.

As Offutt mythologises the history of the Melungeons, then, he is dramatising the degradation of Appalachian culture. Whereas *Kentucky Straight* uniformly advocated the preservation of cultural tradition, *Out of the Woods* takes an ambiguous stance on the matter, asserting that an unthinking continuity of tradition cannot and -- more importantly -- should not be sustained in contemporary society. “Melungeons” witnesses the last retaliatory murder of a member of the Mullins and Gipson clans, and the death of a feud that has lasted sixty years. Haze Gipson’s death, though, rings in tandem the knell of one of the last societies to exist in America, independent of modernisation.<sup>70</sup> Beulah Mullins is eighty-four years old, and the final member of her family to live in isolation and self-sufficiency in the remote hollows of eastern Kentucky. As she walks to town through the night, under the burden of her sawed-off shotgun and her stew pot, Mullins recalls that she has only been to town once before, when there had been no blacktop highway or even automobiles. That occasion marked the one time her family had been forced to look outside for supplies: usually, they had “burned old buildings for nails, plucking them

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<sup>70</sup> The Amish, of course, would be another such society.

hot from the debris, but that year a spring flood had washed them away” (OW, 47). When Beulah had made that trek to town to buy nails for a hogpen, the railway station was the centre of town, and it was “busy with people, wagons, and mules” (OW, 49). Years later, as she searches for Haze Gipson’s hideout, the railway tracks are “rusty” with disuse and the town emptied of people; Mullins heads “into the silence of improvement” (OW, 49-50). The busy community that Beulah witnessed years earlier has vanished; in its place is a ghost town, home only to police cars and neon signs. As in *Kentucky Straight*, Offutt questions the popular conjoining of modernisation with improvement. “The silence of improvement” must be interpreted as a sarcastic commentary on the fate of a town so drastically “improved” that it is no longer recognisable as the epicentre of rural life in Appalachia.

Yet, while “Melungeons” is concerned with the fate of a culture that no longer exists in isolation, it is also a story about murder. As much as Beulah Mullins is the incarnation of “the mountain itself,” bringing to town the “earth and rain, the steady wind along the ridge” (OW, 56), she is also the last remnant of a culture that advocates Old Testament-style justice. This story explores what has become a central dilemma for native Appalachians: the pull of a culture whose customs have made it impossible to remain there, versus the emotional hardship of becoming separated from home. Goins’ wartime experiences demonstrate that he is certainly not incapable of committing the act of murder, but he simply cannot reconcile himself to the cultural expectation of fatalistic violence. The unhappiness of Goins and Ray (and indeed, most of the characters of *Out of the Woods*) questions the degree to which people are free to exert agency over their own lives, to successfully distance themselves from the environment of their roots.

In response to Goins’ newspaper article about the ethnicity of the Melungeons, Gipson scoffs, “It don’t matter where we upped from. It’s who we are now that matters” (OW, 52). The idealisation of this notion, that man is creator of his

self and his fate, is a quintessentially American belief; success is contingent upon personal endeavour and wholly divorced from inauspicious beginnings. Offutt's rendering of this belief, however, is more pragmatic, in its treatment of the emotional ramifications of cultural desertion. Haze Gipson's statement is thus obviously ironic: where he has "upped from" has informed every facet of his life; his roots (as a member of the Melungeon Gipson clan) are "what matters," and what has caused him to be where he is now (in jail, hiding out from an enemy Melungeon). His past also informs Goins' present, albeit inversely: he has spent his life trying to extract himself from the morbidity of his culture. Both men have "missed every wedding and funeral" their families have held in their absences, but Gipson asserts that Goins has forfeited his right to mourn this loss. According to Gipson, Goins lives away from home "by choice ... You can walk back out your ridge any day of the year. Don't know why a man wouldn't when he could" (OW, 45).

Gipson's subscription to the ethos of the Melungeon culture resonates in this assertion, which recalls Kay (of "Out of the Woods") and her confusion over her brother's departure from Kentucky: "Him leaving never made sense ... He hadn't done nothing and nobody was after him" (OW, 20). For Gipson and Kay -- and even Goins himself -- Goins' expatriation is a betrayal of his inherent cultural values. Offutt's description of the initial controversy between the Mullins and Gipson families, which caused twenty-eight separate revenge killings, invites the reader to dissect the nature of traditional Melungeon culture. In this light, the first argument -- over ownership of meat from a bear accidentally killed by a felled tree -- is ridiculous. It is in evaluating this culture that Goins' dilemma becomes more convoluted: Melungeon culture is neither wholly good nor wholly evil, but the preservation of the good necessitates retention of the more extreme traditions. Beulah Mullins functions as the emblem of this culture; she is at once an advocate of "point-blank living" (OW, 51) and admirably self-sufficient, and yet capable of killing a

man over an absurd injustice that happened sixty years previously. Goins may have moved to town to get away from the killing, but in doing so, he has lost connection with the other vital aspects of his culture. He “didn’t hunt or fish anymore, had stopped gathering mushrooms and ginseng” (OW, 45), and he “missed living with the land” (OW, 50).

It is important to note that Goins is able to kill when he deems it necessary. His conduct in Korea -- where he killed five enemy soldiers -- was seen as heroic, and earned him both the Purple Heart and Bronze Star. Goins himself, however, is unable to justify these actions; his storage of the medals (in a cigar box under his bed) symbolises his refusal to glorify death. In the same cigar box, Goins keeps the newspaper clipping that identifies Melungeons as “a vanishing race” (OW, 51). His unspoken disavowal of the idealisation of murder (by hiding his awards for violent heroism) reflects the impossibility of the existence of traditional Melungeon ways of life in contemporary culture.

Offutt’s infusion of awareness within Goins leads the jailer to dissect the information he reads about himself and his people in the newspaper article from Lexington. It suggests that the Melungeons were a lost tribe of Israel, and Goins substantiates this claim by thinking of examples of Biblical names occurring within the Melungeon clans. The surname “Goins” is “a Melungeon name” (OW, 42), but “Ephraim” designates him as “the leader of a lost tribe who never made it to the land of milk and honey” (OW, 53). The lost tribe, then, becomes the ragged group of expatriates who have been cast out of the homeland (by choice or by force), convinced that paradise lies beyond the reach of their home hill. This paradise remains elusive for the exiled Melungeons, though; Goins wonders if his Jewish friend, Abe (or Abraham, father of the Israelites) “knew where the lost tribes went” (OW, 53). Goins’ journey, to Korea and then back to Kentucky (but still away from home), is reminiscent of that of Moses. Both wandered for decades, enslaved by the

search for an elusive homeland. Unlike Moses, however, Goins is finally able to return home at the end of the story: now that the culture of traditional feuding has waned, Goins is free to step “into the sun ... [it] was warm against his face” (OW, 57).

In the first sentence of this story, Deputy Goins had “watched the light that seeped beneath the door of the jailhouse. When it reached a certain pock in the floor, it would be time to go home” (OW, 39). The “pock in the floor” is the death of Haze Gipson and the imprisonment of Beulah Mullins; with their eradication, the distasteful fragments of Melungeon culture have been removed, and Goins is finally able to go home. His years of wandering have led him to the land of milk and honey: his culture, his home, and his traditions have now been emancipated from the existence of senseless, retaliatory violence.

### **His Biggest Source of Pain: Ideological Distancing in “Target Practice”**

The ideological distancing of self from home that is displayed by Goins (in “Melungeons”) and Ray (in “Target Practice”) necessitates further exploration of each man’s disjointed relationship with his native culture. Whereas Goins actively seeks material evidence of his genetic heritage, Ray’s encampment near his father leads to knowledge of his paternal ancestry. As Goins attempts to forge a personal and cultural alliance with cultures that have long since ceased to exist, Ray demonstrates an equal frustration with the microsociological manifestation of his culture’s demise: his relationship with his father, Franklin. Ray “could not recall ever seeing his father anywhere but in his own house or yard” (OW, 144); Franklin simultaneously represents the dangers and benefits of lifelong fealty to a place. He is a consummate woodsman and the undisputed baron of his home hill, but neighbours describe Franklin as having “a funny turn to him.” He chops wood twice daily, even

“though he had a gas furnace,” and “hadn’t been off the hill in three years” (OW, 138). Ray cannot “recall ever seeing his father anywhere but in his own house or yard;” even a visit to his son’s house at the opposite end of his hill makes Franklin appear “vulnerable” (OW, 144). Franklin had “criticized [Ray] for leaving Kentucky,” but Ray’s return home has not pleased his father, either (OW, 151). Their target practice on the hill finally gives Ray some insight into his troubled relationship with his father, as he begins to realise the extent to which Franklin is ideologically paralysed.

As they reload their rifles, Ray asks his father, “Why do you stay away from me?” Franklin says, “because you act like my dad,” though Ray insists, “I ain’t him.” Franklin claims, though, that Ray “can hurt me just as bad,” and when Ray says that he won’t, Franklin simply says, “you don’t know that” (OW, 151).<sup>71</sup> Instantly, Franklin ceases to be the fearsome patriarch of his hill, and becomes a father whose relationship with his son has been ruined by his own father/son relationship, a father who would rather remain separate from his son than risk being hurt. Though Franklin “told a different story ... every time [he] talked about his [own] dad,” Ray learns on this day that his grandfather had been a “late homosexual” who had shot himself. Franklin assumes the homosexuality of his father because “before he died ... he started wearing flowerdy shirts and going to town at night” (OW, 146-7). Though Franklin flatteringly portrays his father as someone who had a red neck from working the land his whole life, and could “shoot [a hawk] out of the air with an army pistol [and] throw a hatchet like a tomahawk,” Franklin was ultimately “hurt” by the fact that his father had “never liked [him] much” (OW, 146). With his father’s suicide, that hurt is abated. As an adult, however, Ray begins to resemble his

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<sup>71</sup> This exchange is remarkably similar to one between Offutt and his own father. Chris says, “I love you” to Andrew, who only nods. Chris tries again: “My biggest source of pain ... is the tension between us. I hoped that coming home would help fix it.” Andrew only says, “You are quicker to take offense at me than anyone on the planet” (NH, 209). Chris and the fictional Ray hope that physical proximity will lead to emotional closeness, but Andrew and Franklin’s protective barriers are not so easily breached.



grandfather, and Franklin sees himself as the “middleman” between grandson and grandfather -- a role he does not want. Though Appalachian culture dictated Franklin’s protestation of Ray’s original departure from Kentucky, he soon realised that “if [Ray had] stayed gone, I wouldn’t have to be anybody” (OW, 147). Ray’s absence gives Franklin a sense of autonomy; he can pretend he is not the son of a man who never liked him, nor the father of a son who reminds him too much of that distant father. Franklin, like Ray, had hoped for a daughter, but he “wasn’t that lucky” (OW, 150). Ray’s return resurrects all of Franklin’s old hurts, though their conversation over target practice helps identify their relationship’s most serious problems.

Just as Ray decides that he will leave Kentucky again, to return to Detroit, to a place where he “always knew where he stood with people,” his father turns around, “the barrel of his rifle pointing at his son.” Ray shoots his father, twice. The second bullet “made a hole in the part of his father’s coat that covered his chest.” Implicit in Ray’s reaction is the belief that his father would, indeed, shoot his son. If Ray did not think Franklin would shoot him, he would not have needed to defend himself. The irony, of course, is that this incident occurs immediately after Franklin reveals his fear of being hurt by Ray; the act of being physically hurt removes the possibility that Franklin can be emotionally hurt by Ray in the future. The fact that Franklin does not die, however, adds another dimension to this story. If Franklin had died, Ray would not have come to realise his love for his father; he would have always remembered Franklin as a hard man who refused to be close to his son. Instead, as Ray struggles to get Franklin into his car, he noticed for the first time Franklin’s “pores, the lines beside his mouth, the sagging skin beneath his eyes. It was the first time he had ever looked at his father without being afraid” (OW, 155). In shooting Franklin, Ray simultaneously rids himself of a lifelong fear, and gains the odd

respect of a father who has been conditioned to only appreciate physical gestures of tenacity and strength.

Just as Goins cannot return home -- literally or figuratively -- until the Melungeon warring has ceased, Ray cannot be “home” until his difficulties with his father have been resolved. The shooting of Franklin, and the subsequent emotional exchange between father and son, remove the ideological distance that has long persisted between these two men. Finally, as Ray admits his love for his father, he can return “home.”

### **Maybe This is What Finds You: “Barred Owl” and the Trauma of Displacement**

“Barred Owl” situates its narrator and Tarvis Eldridge, two natives of Kentucky, in the town of Greeley, Colorado. The narrator left home following his divorce, but Tarvis’s departure was precipitated by his community’s inability to acknowledge his individuality. Tarvis is one of twelve children, and his “last name was Eldridge. He grew up on Eldridge Ridge, overlooking Eldridge Creek in Eldridge County ... Nobody called him Tarvis. He was Ida Cumbow’s fourth boy, a black-headed Eldridge” (OW, 130). Of Tarvis, Offutt writes that “no one knew who he was” (OW, 130); the community’s insistence upon aligning an individual with a clan presupposes that individual’s self-identification with the clan, and further, that a person’s identity emanates from the group. Tarvis reveals himself to be not unwilling, but incapable, of participating fully in the customs of his culture. When the narrator asks him why he is not skinning his owl himself, Tarvis ashamedly replies, “I never skinned nothing ... Nobody taught me on account of I never pulled the trigger. I was raised to it, but I just wasn’t able” (OW, 123-4). Tarvis’s failure to hunt is a betrayal of the masculine rites of Appalachian culture; his impotence in this

pursuit excludes him irrevocably from the fundamentally homosocial enclave that defines masculinity in Appalachian culture.

Throughout “Barred Owl,” Tarvis’s intellectual superiority over the narrator is clear. When the narrator asks if he has ever found a flint arrowhead, Tarvis slowly shakes his head, then replies, “Chert ... No flint in America” (OW, 132). Similarly, Tarvis is intimately familiar with the properties of his catch, the barred owl: “It’s pure built to hunt. Got three ear holes and it flies silent. It can open and close each pupil separate from the other one” (OW, 126). The unfortunate correlation of Tarvis’s intelligence is his consciousness of his own shortcomings, and an awareness of the “shame” they bring (OW, 124). As the narrator questions Tarvis’s inability to hunt, it is apparent that Tarvis has himself queried this deficiency. His best response is “I don’t know;” he then elucidates further: “Hear that woodpecker? Take and cut its beak off and it’ll pound its face against a tree until it dies. Not hunting does me the same way. But I still can’t do it” (OW, 129). Tarvis’s analogy of the woodpecker underscores the essence of “Barred Owl”: the vacuous nature of human agency, and the inherent dangers of warring internal impulse and external pressure. Tarvis’s desire to belong to his culture is evident in his obsessive gathering of animal detritus: skulls, bones, wings, and hundreds of feathers. His collection acknowledges his cultural compulsion to assert man’s dominance over animal, yet his insurmountable aversion to hunting demarcates his powerlessness to exert external influence over that internal compulsion. He is a passive participant in the hunting tradition,<sup>72</sup> and it is this passivity that is a serious problem for Tarvis in his quest to be a fully actualised member of the Appalachian masculine community.

The dichotomy of interiority versus exteriority is more fully demonstrated in the narrator’s foray into taxidermy. As Tarvis extracts the barred owl from its bag, he comments that it is a “Beaut, ain’t it?” There is “not a mark to her” (OW, 123). The narrator proceeds to skin the owl, but as he tugs its external layer “free of the

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<sup>72</sup> Like Virgil Caudill’s reluctance to engage with the tradition of revenge killing in *The Good Brother*.

carcass,” he notices that “both legs, the skull, each wing, its neck and ribs” are broken; “Its head hung from several shattered vertebrae ... it had died pretty hard” (OW, 125). The owl’s ability to cloak its internal trauma with an unblemished exterior mirrors the ordeal that faces both the narrator and Tarvis. Tarvis uses his hermitic existence, collecting already-deceased animals from the surrounding woods, as a foil for the “guilt” he feels over his unwillingness to hunt. The narrator, however, cauterises his own wounds with alcohol, sedating himself to the degree that he remains in a permanent state of actual and emotional intoxication. The narrator paints dormitories at the local college, and enjoys the process of making a room “a different color. The walls and the ceiling hadn’t gone anywhere,” but he convinces himself that he has created “a new place” (OW, 118). Similarly, the narrator believes that in coming to Colorado, he has created a new self, divorced from both his wife and his former life. The narrator’s progressive relationship with Tarvis, however, forces him to question the efficacy of his superficial changes. The narrator has remained intoxicated for seven years, but after meeting Tarvis, he finds himself in “the blurred space between hangover and the day’s first drink” (OW, 126); it is in these few moments of sobriety that the narrator must admit that “sometimes I didn’t know where I was” (OW, 130).

The narrator’s fluctuating physical location cloaks his mental stasis. He paints rooms, but “each one [is] a mirror image of the last,” and no amount of cosmetic amelioration can alter the intrinsic nature of the rooms’ sameness. The mirrored dorm rooms in turn mirror the inescapability of the narrator’s misery and Tarvis’s internal opposition to hunting. Tarvis’s collecting is his attempt at ignoring his profound unhappiness and trying to “leave” his woes behind; certainly, though, “leaving didn’t help,” because just as “the hallway was filled with identical doors,” all of Tarvis’s ‘choices’ return him to the perpetual disappointment of his internal disjunction from a vital component of his native culture (OW, 130).

Offutt continues to parallel the two Appalachians' internal/external disturbance with the repetitive inclusion of material objects. The author describes Tarvis and the narrator as "a pair of seashells a long way from the beach. If you held one of us to your ear, you'd hear Kentucky in the distance, but listening to both would put you flat in the woods" (OW, 131). The cavernous exteriors of these men have indeed travelled far from their point of origin, but their selves echo the whisper of home. At the conclusion of "Barred Owl," the narrator "suddenly thought of something that drained me like a shell ... I missed Kentucky" (OW, 136). The previous paragraph witnesses the narrator throwing a full bottle of whiskey out of his car window. However, "the bottle didn't break," and he hears "the bourbon emptying into the ditch" (OW, 135-6). As the whiskey drains from the bottle, the grip of anaesthetising liquor loosens its hold on the narrator, giving him the clarity to admit his longing for Kentucky. Like the bourbon draining away, so the narrator becomes emptied of a falsified satisfaction with the life he has made for himself in Colorado. The cavernous interior of the narrator's external shell is now receptive to what has been numbed for seven years: he wants to go home.

Just as the narrator's relationship with Tarvis has enabled him to admit his long-subdued desires, the same relationship inspires Tarvis to regain control over his life and his cultural identity. Ironically, it is the manner in which he dies that ensures his membership in the masculine annals of Appalachian culture. The police officer relates the scene of Tarvis' death "in a slow, embarrassed fashion":

Tarvis had fastened one end of the bow to an iron plate and screwed the plate to the floor. Guy wires held the bow upright. He fitted an arrow with a chert point into the bow, drew it tight, and braced it. A strip of rawhide ran across the floor to the couch where they found him. All he had to do was pull the leather cord to release the arrow. (OW, 134)

Quite literally, Tarvis hunts himself. In staging his suicide, he demonstrates an intimacy with his cultural tradition that he had never been able to express in life. In

his final moments, Tarvis simultaneously becomes both the hunter and the prey; inasmuch as he could never summon the will to take another life, the act of his death asserts his ultimate fealty to Appalachian masculinity by finally becoming a hunter.

In the opening story of this collection, also entitled “Out of the Woods,” Offutt offers a paradigm for Appalachian culture, as represented by the family of the dead man. This family, the brothers and mother of Gerald’s wife, Kay, functions as the governing body to which Gerald must submit himself for approval, in the hope of becoming one of them. Just as Tarvis has spent the entirety of his life trying to assimilate himself to the masculine subculture of Appalachia, Gerald recognises that until he demonstrates his capability to this group of brothers, he will always remain “nothing but a third or fourth cousin” (OW, 20). The journey to Nebraska to fetch home the missing brother, Ory, is a “chore [nobody] wanted,” but Gerald recognises that if “he brought Ory home, maybe they’d cut the barrier that kept him on the edge of things” (OW, 19-20). To Gerald’s mind, the culture in which he is installed is the limit of his options, and with that in mind, he endeavours to become as ensconced within it as he possibly can.

As Gerald prepares for his departure (in a borrowed truck -- his own vehicle would not, tellingly, make it out of Kentucky), Offutt reveals the extent of his physical parameters: he “had never been out of the county,” much less the state (OW, 21). The next sentence foreshadows the inevitable broadening of Gerald’s perspective that will accompany his departure from Kentucky: he tries on a suit that had belonged to his father, but “it was snug in the shoulders, and short in the legs” (OW, 21). Significantly, even preceding his departure, Gerald shows signs that he has outgrown his past. As he drives through Indiana, Gerald notices that the land is “flat as a playing card ... there was nowhere to hide, no safety at all” (OW, 21). His obvious connection of the hills of eastern Kentucky with the concept of safety

demarcates Gerald's initial attitude towards the landscape of home. Gradually, though, he comes to recognise the singularity of his perspective; after he crosses the Mississippi, he stops for the night and lies down to rest. A shooting star crosses the sky, and Gerald mistakes it for a shot from a gun. When he finally realises the nature of what he has seen, he notes that "the hills at home blocked so much sky that he'd never seen [a shooting star]" (OW, 22). Whereas the hills once provided "safety" with their ability to envelop, Gerald now begins to realise the limitations of such insularity.

The anonymity of the characters in "Two-Eleven All Around" typifies the thematic drifting of the stories in *Out of the Woods*. The narrator is engaged in a sexually-driven relationship with a woman who vacillates between reliance upon alcohol and Prozac, and who fills her numbed hours by listening intently to her police scanner for news of crime in Caspar, Wyoming. The Appalachian narrator of "Two-Eleven All Around" begins his lengthy monologue as he discovers that his girlfriend has locked him out of her house, although he "didn't mind that much because things were drifty from the start" (OW, 79). Offutt's use of the word "drifty" encapsulates the nature of the narrator's lifestyle, and further applies it to the contemporary phenomenon of raising children in an America where divorce is now so common. The narrator notes that "the way it works anymore is you don't raise your own kids. You raise someone else's while a stranger takes care of yours, and then when that doesn't work out, everyone moves along to the next person with a kid" (OW, 85); here, perhaps, is the only context in which Offutt suggests that the overwhelming deracination of modern Americans will create a lasting impact upon future generations. The other characters of *Out of the Woods* are primarily concerned with how their own displacement affects them personally, but in "Two-Eleven All Around," Offutt indicates the broader cultural shift created by national transience.

The effect of such transience is “grown kids who haven’t been raised so much as jerked up” (OW, 85); here, Offutt argues succinctly for the importance of stability.

### **A Heavy Load to Keep Him Stable: “High Water Everywhere” and the Futility of Escape**

“High Water Everywhere” is set in Crawfordsville, Oregon, the furthest west of any location in *Out of the Woods*. Its protagonist, a trucker from Kentucky named Zules, views the land as “a tabletop, and he was heading for its edge” (OW, 92). The ever-encroaching flood allegorises the collective crises that the characters in “High Water Everywhere” now face: they must all decide whether to remain within the stifling safety of the familiar, or chance the dangers of the unknown. Like Zules, they are approaching the edge, the limits of their tolerance, and are on a mission to find higher ground.

Zules and the native Oregonian siblings (Kenneth and his sister) complement each other in Offutt’s bid to explore further the perilous nature of abandoning the comforts of home without a concrete plan for the future. This is perhaps the crux of *Out of the Woods*, where each displaced Kentuckian’s dilemma over home is inversely related to an initial desire to be freed from that environment. These characters have all left Kentucky not with an ambition to reach another place, but only with the need to leave home. Seldom is the expatriate’s departure contingent upon circumstances so dramatic as Haze Gipson’s; to paraphrase Kay (“Out of the Woods”): they had not committed a crime, and nobody was after them. These characters leave Appalachia with the notion that they are escaping a restrictive social or familial environment, and thus head west, conscious of its promise of anonymity and freedom. The ambiguity of such a promise, however, coupled with the disappointing reality of a rootless existence, feed each character’s sense of



displacement, which in turn becomes as much of a problem as remaining in Kentucky. Moreover, as Offutt tries to defuse the negative reputation of Appalachia, he is also asserting the universality of his characters. "High Water Everywhere" demonstrates that the west can easily become as stifling as Kentucky; what is addressed here is the futility of escape without benefit of destination.

Kenneth, the police officer in "High Water Everywhere" and the brother of the miserable woman whom Zules repeatedly encounters, is emblematic of a younger Zules. The Kentuckian offers no real explanation for his decision to become a trucker, only describes himself as "restless" and admits to disliking the incestuous knowledge that accompanies life in an isolated culture. Kenneth, as "the law" (OW, 98) in this small town in Oregon, is paralysed by the cramped environment in which he knows everyone, "who their folks are and their kids. Every little thing they do. I know who steals and who looks in windows and who sleeps with who" (OW, 114). He is only able to arrest Zules and the Oklahoman, Sheetrock, because they are the first people "he saw all summer that he didn't have a history with" (OW, 109); the presence of these conspicuous outsiders offers Kenneth the opportunity to exert a power that is handicapped by a loyalty to his home and its residents. Kenneth initially tells Zules that he became a cop because he just likes "to see things run smooth," but then he concedes that his reasoning was much more simplistic: "I couldn't afford a car" (OW, 114). The instrument of Zules' escape -- his vehicle -- is exactly what keeps Kenneth anchored to his job and this place. Kenneth, approaching the limits of his desire to remain in place, admits: "I don't know what to do. I thought I did but I'm not sure anymore" (OW, 114). Zules has already addressed his own similar anxiety by fleeing Kentucky, but for the Oregon police officer, escape to the unfamiliar is terrifying, and he is therefore paralysed at home in Crawfordsville.

Kenneth's unnamed sister is unlike her brother, who has "never lived anywhere but this place" (OW, 114). She went away to college, but returned home,

feeling “backwards and upside down” (OW, 104). Aware of the enticements of the outside world, the sister declares, “I shouldn’t have come back here after school. I guess that’s what ruined me” (OW, 106). She and Zules have a knowledge that Kenneth does not, an ability to compare the benefits of both staying in place and breaking away. The sister views her hometown as “one big jail of water,” and Zules thinks “she resembled someone trying not to drown” (OW, 111, 108). She blames staying in Crawfordsville for her descent from an intelligent woman -- self-sufficient, capable, with her own business -- to a woman desperate to escape the prison of her static existence. Like the floodwater, though, and like Kenneth’s knowledge of the intimacies of their hometown that his police work provides, the woman’s misery has been building over time. She has not merely reached saturation point; more likely, “pressure had torn a hole through a weak spot,” and just as “water was surging across the bottomland” (OW, 91), the woman’s crisis of identity has reached its apex by the time Zules arrives in town.

Sheetrock James, the man with whom Zules shares a jail cell, is the only character in “High Water Everywhere” who is both cognisant of his own desires and making a conscious effort to fulfil them. He declares, “I’m a stayer ... I got everything I want right here, man. You ought to stay, too. Lot to be said for a man who stays put” (OW, 103). Sheetrock has taken up permanent residence in the jail, with the television’s remote control in his pocket and his toothbrush in his mouth. Unlike Zules and the woman, who descend into a basement to inspect the flood damage, Sheetrock waits out the flood in the safety of the second-floor jail, deeming it the “best place to be right now” (OW, 103). Sheetrock’s story of his mother’s death and his unkempt physical appearance may inspire pity, but in this assembly of stranded travellers, he is the only person acting in accordance with his own wishes.

As Zules stays in Crawfordsville through the flood, he is faced with the realities of three people who act as surrogates of his own emotional predicament:

Kenneth, who is unhappy with his hometown, but unsure of how he can ameliorate his situation; the woman, who is unhappy with her hometown, and positive that leaving is the only way to rectify her life's downward spiral; and Sheetrock, who is determined to remain in place, making the best of any situation with the surety of stasis. Zules' time in Crawfordsville affords him the opportunity to examine the trajectory of his own life, as reflected in the experiences of the others. Before arriving, he was not aware of his homesickness, but just as he sees himself on the news and realises that he "had never seen himself on camera and didn't care for his appearance" (OW, 101), he now begins to examine himself in the mirror provided by Kenneth, his sister, and Sheetrock. For the first time, Zules questions his decision to leave Kentucky and become a trucker -- even though he "couldn't think of much worse work except maybe driving a truck" (OW, 102).

In conversation with the woman, he admits that he has felt unable to return home to live, noting that "once you leave a place, you're sort of plowed under for living there again" (OW, 106). Each time Zules returns home, it is to his mother's house, where he feels stifled by her presence and "smothered" by the physical environment of Kentucky, which is "like living in a maze" (OW, 109, 95). Since leaving home initially, Zules has been in constant motion, traversing the country and sleeping in his truck. When Zules says, "I don't stay nowhere but the truck" (OW, 106), there is a purposeful ambiguity in Offutt's use of the word "stay." To stay, of course, means to reside somewhere for a short period of time (i.e., to sleep); to stay, though, in the context of "High Water Everywhere," is to remain in place, motionless. When Zules indicates that he "stays" in the truck, a mobile object, he undermines the usual semantics of "staying;" Zules' conception of stasis is thus inherently obtuse.

Zules' time in Crawfordsville, without the reliant mobility of his truck, forces him to confront his attitude towards home, and enables him to alter his perspective.

Whereas the hills had once “smothered” him, Zules now realises that those hills are actually a physical defence against the dangerous onslaught of flooding. In Kentucky, there is “high ground, woods to hide in, and thousands of creeks to drain the water” (OW, 109); as Zules begins to appreciate these qualities, he also realises that the “freedom” he experienced on the road has simply been aimless wandering.

Zules “envied Sheetrock for knowing exactly what he wanted” (OW, 109), because for many years he has been adrift, unsure of his ultimate destination but lacking a concrete reason to stay in one place. Finally, he realises “that he’d been hearing the dull rumble of thunder for a long time,” and is able to admit that he would “rather be a stayer” (OW, 114). Just as Kenneth and his sister’s crises of locus arrived together with the flood, Zules’ own personal storm has been brewing for some time. When he decides to “head home for good” (OW, 115), “for good” indicates both permanence and an evaluation of his decision. Offutt concludes “High Water Everywhere” by noting that “it was dangerous to drive fast without a trailer ... He needed a heavy load to keep him stable” (OW, 115).

The final story of *Out of the Woods* presents a character complementary to the woman featured in “High Water Everywhere.” Lynn, the photographer-cum-boxer in “Tough People,” rivals Kenneth’s sister in her desire for freedom. She tells the narrator of “Tough People,” “I just want out of this hotel, this town, and everything else. I don’t care how” (OW, 168). Unlike the woman in “High Water Everywhere,” however, Lynn is actively pursuing her freedom. She chooses male companions who enable her journey towards an elusive goal, and she is not afraid to trade her current, penniless boyfriend for Jack King, whose manner promises both security and mobility. The woman in “High Water Everywhere” also engages in a sexual relationship with Zules, a man who is constantly in transit; at the crucial moment, though, this woman allows Zules to leave without her, telling him, “There’s no need

to stay ... or go" (OW, 111). Zules' fleeting partnership with this woman is erased by her ultimate inability to summon the determination to leave her hometown. Lynn, however, simply hands over her boxing prize money to her recent companion and says, "I'm going with Jack ... I'm sorry" (OW, 175). Lynn functions as the embodiment of the other woman's desires; the nameless character that is germinated in "High Water Everywhere" comes into final fruition in "Tough People." The constant sadness expressed by the first woman, however, is not nullified by Lynn's determination to remain free; more pointedly, Offutt describes Lynn as "sad but trying to smile" (OW, 176). To be free is not necessarily to be happy, just as remaining in place is not always a choice fraught with misery.

Offutt further parallels the women of "High Water Everywhere" and "Tough People" by presenting their occupations as the inverse of one another. The woman of "High Water Everywhere" owns a frame shop, but Lynn is a photographer. Lynn creates lasting images, while the other woman produces nothing of substance; her frames are the skeleton to Lynn's vital, corporeal existence. The narrator of "Tough People" imagines opening a restaurant with Lynn that would cater specially to Kentuckians and photographers: "the menu would be shaped like a negative with holes along the side" (OW, 161). Lynn is the photographer, the creator of the image (or at least, the producer of a central image), while the woman of "High Water Everywhere" provides nothing of substance -- she merely frames what others have created.

The strategic symmetry that Offutt uses to highlight the disparities in the symbolic function of these two women echoes the underlying argument of *Out of the Woods*: Appalachia is the photograph -- the substance, the meat, the marrow of these characters -- and all other locations merely frame it. The western states that the characters of *Out of the Woods* visit thus fade into the periphery, as Offutt redirects their focus back towards Appalachia, towards home.

## Chapter 9

### Second Hand Smoke: Cultural Appropriation and Holocaust Literature

Art Spiegelman's memoir-cum-graphic novel, *Maus: My Father Bleeds History* (1987), grapples with the war-time memories of the author's father and his survival of Auschwitz, as well as Spiegelman's own struggle to construct an identity for himself that is both inclusive of his parents' troubled history and independent from its potential for suffocation. In the second *Maus* instalment, *And Here My Troubles Began* (1992), Spiegelman visits his psychiatrist, and together they ruminate over the author's decision to create and publish his father's story. Predicting the form of potential criticism for his endeavour, Spiegelman quotes Samuel Beckett: "Speech is a desecration of silence." He then pauses dramatically, before pointing out that Beckett, in fact, *said* those words, committing a desecration of his own (*Maus II*, 44). Beckett's words are often used to frame questions of ownership and purpose, in relation to stories of the Holocaust: Who can tell these stories -- who has the right to represent the experiences of millions of persecuted Jews?<sup>73</sup> Who benefits from these stories, and how? What are the possible ramifications of disrupting the sanctity of the post-war silence?<sup>74</sup> As we will see in the following chapter, Chris Offutt's *No Heroes: A Memoir of Coming Home* (2002), finds kinship with Spiegelman's *Maus*, as Offutt contemplates the process by which he decides to tell the story of the survival of his parents-in-law of the Nazi death camps.

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<sup>73</sup> While I do not dispute the simultaneous persecution of other people, this chapter will limit its focus to the experiences of Jews in the Holocaust.

<sup>74</sup> The discussion of silence would be incomplete without reference to Isak Dinesen's story, "The Blank Page," from the collection, *Last Tales* (1957). She writes: "When the story-teller is loyal, eternally and unswervingly loyal to the story, there, in the end, silence will speak. Where the story has been betrayed silence is but emptiness. But we, the faithful when we have spoken our last word, will hear the voice of silence." Further, Errol Trzebinski, in *Silence Will Speak* (1977), refers to both this Dinesen quotation, as well as this, from the Book of Job: "Let me have silence, and I will speak, and let come on me what may."

A response to such questions must recognise the theory of cultural appropriation, wherein, typically, features of a minority culture are expressed by a member of the dominant majority. Colonialism offers many examples of this phenomenon, as do countless texts written *about* Aboriginal (or Native American or Canadian) people but not *by* members of these groups. This chapter will examine the existing arguments for and against cultural appropriation, and then discuss specifically Holocaust literature within this paradigm.

The semantics of the phrase, “cultural appropriation,” involves theft and forcible removal. To appropriate -- or to take for one’s own use -- is to assume ownership of something to which one has no demonstrable rights. Cultural appropriation is defined as “the taking -- from a culture that is not one’s own -- of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge” (Ziff and Rao, 1997). The dominant analyses of cultural appropriation agree that it is a form of pillage, a trespass against invisible boundaries defined by genealogy and group belonging.<sup>75</sup> However, I would argue that such analyses lend themselves best to issues of material concern: to sell “Native American” dream catchers stamped “Made in Taiwan” to tourists at the Grand Canyon is a blatant example of cultural theft.<sup>76</sup> This enterprise simply cannot be justified -- except perhaps by the ignorance or gullibility of the buyers, and to term it immoral and opportunistic is clear. By contrast, literary forms of cultural appropriation are fraught with more subtle complications, some of which have to do with net benefit. While the beneficiaries of the dream catchers at the Grand Canyon receive only economic reward, the benefits of literary appropriation can be more noble. A well-researched and tactful text may be a valuable addition to the literature of the cultural subject;

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<sup>75</sup> See Bruce Ziff and Pratima Rao’s collection of essays on cultural appropriation, *Borrowed Power* (1997).

<sup>76</sup> This example recalls Offutt’s own experiences at the Grand Canyon, which he recounts in *The Same River Twice*: “The canyon gift shops employed Hopi women who sold copper-hued plastic dolls dressed in fringed felt. The hollow foot of each bore an inked stamp that read ‘Made in Japan’” (68-69).

indeed, it would be difficult to maintain that it is imperative to write only “what you know.” Certainly, writing what is familiar is a worthy starting point, but should imagination and creativity be girded by borders of culture? Erich Kahler insists that art must be “an act of conquest, the discovery of a new sphere of human consciousness, and thereby of new reality ... There is no true art without this exploratory quality, without this frontier venture” (151). Is literature that borrows from a culture external to the author’s own necessarily cultural appropriation, a “theft” of intellectual property -- or should it be considered pioneering, an outlet of true artistry?

This is the dilemma of writing the unfamiliar -- potential cultural appropriation (bad) versus cross-cultural exchange (good) -- one that has been reinforced by a contemporary and perhaps dangerous insistence upon “truth” and “authenticity.”<sup>77</sup> While it is reasonable to assume that an autobiography (for example) contains mostly truthful information (although usually embellished or sculpted), and more pointedly, that the reader has the *right* to expect truth from “autobiography,” it is simply ridiculous to assume the authenticity of a work of fiction -- and indeed, such an exercise negates the very notion of fiction itself. A writer may successfully portray the glamour of Los Angeles without being from (or *of*) that city; indeed, a non-native Los Angelino may write with a freshness of perspective unattainable by a jaded native. Regionalists might argue that what is lost in non-native accounts is resonance,<sup>78</sup> but to attempt to quantify “resonance” is to come up against a literary Gordian Knot: there can be no resolution without the bold cut declaring such an attempt inherently meaningless. The linkage of authenticity with value (or, conversely, the assumption that an “inauthentic” work is inherently worthless)

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<sup>77</sup> See again Chapter 3 for a more thorough discussion of “truth” and the autobiographical genre.

<sup>78</sup> Jack Butler writes: “Before, a writer was measured by the fidelity of his rendering. Now she is measured by her ability to accumulate real-world details. There is a difference. The first is a gestural technique, instinct with movement. The second is additive. What is gained is perhaps a sort of freshness and vividness in the portrait. What is lost, perhaps the hardest loss of all, is resonance” (“Still Southern after All These Years,” 38).



ignores countless examples of literary successes in which the author's pedigree does not match the subject matter. Why, then, are readers so eager to denounce such works? Why is something "truthful" instantly "better"? I suspect the answer to such questions is as tangible as notions of "resonance" -- that is, there is no concrete, universal answer that can accommodate the many concerns for literary authenticity.

What is plausible, though, is that the contemporary fascination with "truth" forces writers to consider the "unfamiliar" taboo. White writers who dare to position themselves in the midst of Native American culture (for example) for the sake of fiction are wading into waters already muddied by several decades of revolt against the appropriation of cultural expressions. Non-Native authors of the past may have considered their work a valuable educational resource or -- more likely -- a necessity in the absence of available writings by Native artists (or just did not care). Today, however, as important writers (like Louise Erdrich or Sherman Alexie) provide authentic stories of their culture, is non-Native representation necessary, to the extent that it ever was? To respond in the affirmative is to risk the wrath of cultural exclusionists; indeed, it seems more tactful to replace "necessary" with "appropriate," in which case the answer could be "Yes, but with a heightened sensitivity." To respond in the negative is to shore up cultural boundaries, to emphasise difference and negate the possibility of cultural exchange. The former seems as dangerous as the latter; while one is branded by its potential for controversy, the other supports a narrow-mindedness that contradicts the very foundations of a multicultural society -- another contemporary sacred cow.

## **Silent No Longer: The Holocaust in America's Imagination at Century's End**

1978 is considered to be the “crucial year” for the advent of the Holocaust in the American consciousness: Philip Roth’s *Ghost Writer* was published; NBC televised the highly successful miniseries, *Holocaust*; and Jimmy Carter announced the formation of the Presidential Commission on the Holocaust, which led eventually to the foundation of the Holocaust Memorial Museum (Linenthal, 11). However, until the mid-1960s, popular and political consideration of the Holocaust was largely nonexistent; Peter Novick ascribes this lack to the “integrationist ethos,” by which Jewish Americans tended to focus more on symbols of unification than uniqueness, with a strong resistance to identification solely on the basis of victimhood (6-7). While Novick’s assertion is not incorrect, it does not wholly explain this period of silence; more basic psychological principles must also be considered. The severity of the Holocaust trauma made it initially impossible for survivors to discuss their experiences, and the twenty-year period reflects the intensity of that trauma. Survivors were not ready to tell their stories -- or they felt they did not have a receptive audience: post-war America was not generally ready to confront the truth of the Nazi horrors.

By 1978, however, several factors had coalesced, promoting a new degree of consciousness about the events of 1933 to 1945. First, there came an awareness that all Holocaust survivors would be soon be dead. While this was not an immediate concern in 1978, Elie Wiesel later referred to Holocaust survivors as “the most endangered species in the world” (quoted in Brooke, 1997: 13). Anticipating the potential breadth of such an enterprise, the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale was founded in 1982, dedicating itself to recording survivors’ accounts of the Holocaust; as of the Archive’s twenty-fifth anniversary in the fall of

2007, the stories of four thousand survivors had been collected. Second, the public's denouncement of the Vietnam War, increasingly supported and reinforced by the global media, led to a new acceptance of anti-establishment expression; more importantly, the Vietnam debacle urged Americans to a greater sense of awareness of its role in world events. Novick claims that "the public rationale for Americans' 'confronting' the Holocaust ... is that the Holocaust is the bearer of important lessons that we all ignore at our peril" (12).

These "lessons" were often contrived as heroic inspiration, examples of the resilience of the "human spirit" (as opposed to examples of Nazi inhumanity). One survivor, Sally Grubman, in *Voices from the Holocaust*, recalls the parameters placed upon her Holocaust remembrances:

American Jewish teachers invite me into their classrooms to speak, but they do not want me to make the Holocaust a sad experience. They want me to turn us into heroes and create a heroic experience for the survivors. There is this book they use, *The Holocaust: A History of Courage and Resistance*, but the Holocaust was never a history of courage and resistance. It was destruction by fire of innocent people, and it's not right to make it something it never was. (Rothchild, 373)

Grubman's castigation of Holocaust survivors as heroes came in response to the first wave of stories to reach wider America. The storytellers felt compelled to soften the worst of what they had witnessed, and the audience (particularly after Vietnam) needed to hear tales of triumph and heroism. It must also be noted that prior to the 1970s, the Holocaust was viewed as a distinctly *Jewish* experience;<sup>79</sup> it was not until the final two decades of the twentieth century that "the representation of the Holocaust ... entered the realm of common discourse" (Flanzbaum, 15). Until this recent period, stories of the Holocaust were told by survivors, for primarily Jewish audiences -- if at all. The contemporary influences of the Holocaust, however, are

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<sup>79</sup> This idea is not to be confused with Jewish exclusivism, which contends that Jews were the only victims of the Third Reich. See Doug Myers, "Jews Without Memory: 'Sophie's Choice' and the Ideology of Liberal Anti-Judaism."

plentiful and blind to the ethnographic constitution of listeners. Originally published in 1947, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* has sold twenty-five million copies and has been translated into fifty languages.<sup>80</sup> During the first summer of its opening in 1993, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was flooded with over four thousand visitors every day -- more than twice the anticipated number. Countless American high school students are treated to presentations by Holocaust survivors -- though they are not all as rose-tinted as the speech Sally Grubman was compelled to deliver. The Holocaust has become an important part of the American consciousness, and is no longer merely a Jewish issue.

In 1967, Elie Wiesel wrote an essay for the summer issue of *Judaism*, in which he declared, "We want to remember. But remember what? And what for?" (285). Wiesel might as easily have added, "And who for?" to his list. Who benefits from the stories of the survivors? Indeed, survivors of the Holocaust might be further traumatised by having to dredge up memories long-buried -- or, they might find catharsis in remembering and relating their personal stories. Perhaps the impetus behind the telling indicates psychological reactions: if survivors feel internally compelled to tell their story, then it is more likely that it will prove a cathartic act, whereas if they are externally impelled, perhaps the re-telling will become doubly traumatic. Such a supposition is too simplistic: whatever reason Holocaust survivors might have for revisiting their past, its effects are not confined to its original intent. Volunteers could be traumatised, and those less willing to tell their stories could find unexpected relief from the process. Still, the question of benefit (whether material or psychological) must not be overlooked in an examination of the popularisation of Holocaust stories.

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<sup>80</sup> Though of course Anne Frank's diary is a remarkable testament to the horror of the Second World War, Anne focused more on the intricacies of daily life in the annex, rather than the complexities of war or the concentration camps.

## **I Don't Want You Should Mention: Privacy and the Right to Tell the Story**

Early in *Maus*, Art Spiegelman's father, Vladek, reveals that he had a sexual relationship with another woman before he met his future wife. He later interrupts his story to ask Art to exclude mention of this relationship from the text of *Maus*, but Art protests: "I want to tell your story, the way it really happened." Vladek replies, "But this isn't so proper, so respectful ... I can tell you other stories, but such private things, I don't want you should mention." Obviously, Art *does* include the detail of Vladek's affair, even after he says to his father, "Okay, Okay -- I promise [not to put that in]" (23). Is Spiegelman's inclusion of this anecdote a betrayal of his father's wishes? It is certainly a bit indiscreet, but hardly indicative of a large-scale betrayal.

Emily Miller Budick, professor and chair of the department of American Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, discusses this "betrayal" in a 2001 article for *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* and again in her entry for *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature* (2003). She asks, "What, if anything, justifies Spiegelman's telling of his father's story, against his father's objection, his plea that he not be resubjected to one more version of that humiliation of exposure that he was made to suffer during the Holocaust?" Budick also refers to *Maus* as "a sustained act of violation" (2003: 220); her linguistic punishment, however, seems incompatible with Spiegelman's "crime." Vladek Spiegelman did not ask his son not to write about his Holocaust memories -- indeed, Vladek seemed very willing to be tape-recorded, over a period of years, and described his memories in great detail, knowing they were being transformed into a graphic novel. Spiegelman even includes an occasion wherein he offers his father some of the finished sections of the book, all of which meet with the elder Spiegelman's approval; Vladek is entirely complicit in Art's venture. Budick's castigation of

Spiegelman, in light of this, is itself an act of appropriation, as she tries to make a square peg (Vladek's isolated request of discretion) fit into a round hole (a larger theoretical debate about the appropriation of Holocaust memories).

Though her comments distort the actual text of *Maus*, Budick both reiterates the earlier argument (about the possible benefits of Holocaust survivors revisiting their past) and raises a new issue, one of ownership and authenticity. As much as *Maus* is the story of Art Spiegelman's struggle to negotiate an identity for himself in the shadow of his parents' history, it is also intrinsically the story of his father's survival of the Holocaust. Within the paradigm of cultural appropriation, then, should the son's publication of the father's story be considered theft of intellectual property? Though Budick concedes that *Maus* "is the son's memoir as much as the father's," she goes on to claim that "without his father's story ... Spiegelman has no story at all" (2003: 214, 215). In relation to the earlier question of Spiegelman's appropriation of his father's story, Budick's comments again appear to be unsympathetic to Spiegelman's genuine torment; it would be more appropriate to say that without his father's experiences (of the Holocaust), Spiegelman would have had a much *different* story.<sup>81</sup>

Much academic study has been devoted to the various works of children of Holocaust survivors, but the lack of concentrated criticism implicitly authorised the telling of their tales. With perhaps the exception of Budick's commentary, Spiegelman's *Maus* is criticised for its stylistic liberties and the translation of the Holocaust into a comic -- but few authors question Spiegelman's *right* to reveal this story. Such an exclusion seems logical: children of survivors are close enough to the trauma to have been directly affected by it, and to be able to claim rights to its representation. Jewish novelist and former lawyer, Thane Rosenbaum, refers to the trauma of (these close) others as "second hand smoke," in that the effects of such

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<sup>81</sup> Interestingly, Budick's earlier article (2001) is more forgiving to Spiegelman; she writes: "Art(ie) is the son; his father's history is directly relevant to his. It is genuinely his story, if only by reason of inheritance and blood" (385).

experiences are pervasive, and must have an effect on such a captive audience.<sup>82</sup> The young protagonist of Rosenbaum's novel, Duncan, is the son of Holocaust survivors whose life has been tainted by his parents' memories of their trauma; he has breathed the "second hand smoke" of their anguish. Indeed, both Rosenbaum and Spiegelman are contributors to the second generation of Holocaust literature -- the stories of children of survivors, whose psychology has been deeply affected by the suffering of their parents. Contemplation of these so-called "remnants" (Haas, 2) of the Holocaust has been theorised in a variety of genres (literature, psychiatry and psychology, theology, sociology), and the assertion of the validity of claims of "second hand smoke" (by Jewish children of Jewish survivors) remains uncontested.

In a lesser sense, Jewish Americans, who "occupy an oblique and distant relation to the events of the catastrophe" (Budick, 2003: 217) can claim its depiction as an integral component of their cultural history, although this effort is fraught with uncertainty. Hilene Flanzbaum claims that "for many years silence was deemed the only appropriate response by those who could not offer firsthand testimony" (14), but recent years have not only witnessed the inclusion of survivor testimonies into the American consciousness, but a concomitant relaxation of exactly *who* is eligible to share the stories of the Holocaust. Flanzbaum asks, "What constitutes proper remembrance? Who has the right to tell the story?" but then admits that the answers to these questions are little more than interpretations, opinions of scholars who approach the Holocaust from a wide variety of academic disciplines (6). In his essay, "Inheriting the Holocaust: Jewish American Fiction and the Double Bind of the Second-Generation Survivor," Andrew Furman suggests that "artists who attempt to represent the Holocaust when their knowledge of the event is second- or third-hand ... can expect their work to elicit a special kind of scrutiny from academic and non-academic readers alike." Furman terms this attempt "slippery moral terrain" (84) for the Jewish American authors who would try to write a story of the Holocaust. Does

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<sup>82</sup> See Thane Rosenbaum's novel, *Second Hand Smoke*, 1999.

the simple fact of an author's Jewishness entitle him (or her) to undertake such a challenge?<sup>83</sup> Does one's cultural inclusion sanction this endeavour, though it negates the "privileged authority [of] the survivor"? (Wiesel, 1989: A1). Indeed, a Jewish American author could hardly be accused of cultural appropriation in this instance, but could the precepts of this process be applied to *intra*-cultural appropriation -- that is, the annexation of a "privileged" cultural experience by another member of that group? Is a representation of the Holocaust by an author with no better than "third-hand" knowledge of the events "theft"? Or, can Jewish American authors speak from a position of intimate cultural and religious perspective, and write tactfully and contextually about an experience that constitutes an important part of their own cultural history? The answer undoubtedly lies in the unquantifiable manner in which the authors present the story -- the voice they use, the tone and the sensitivity with which they describe their subject.

Most texts of the Holocaust have been written by either European Jews or Jewish Americans; certainly, the very act of writing about the Holocaust becomes a reinforcement of one's Judaism. Of *Maus*, Dominick LaCapra writes that "in certain ways, [Spiegelman] becomes a Jew or assumes a Jewish identity ... through his concern with the Holocaust" (177). The close examination of one's cultural history can doubtlessly strengthen an individual's sense of group identity, as LaCapra indicates; many Jewish American writers who have delved into the history of their people and the Holocaust come to realise that but for the grace of time, they, too, would have been targets of the Third Reich. Such realisations serve to solidify the felt bond between contemporary Jewish Americans and their European kin. However, Peter Novick contends that he finds "much of recent Jewish Holocaust commemoration ... 'un-Jewish'." He notes Jewish ideology that prescribes finite periods of mourning for its dead, and points out "Christian" imagery in supposedly

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<sup>83</sup> Such arguments recall similar questions, posed in Chapter 3, of autobiography as a political statement about the plight of minorities, or, as in Chapter 1, of the entitlement of non-Appalachians to write stories about that region.



Jewish Holocaust remembrances (11, italics mine). Does the contemporary fascination with the “lessons” of the Holocaust directly contravene Jewish law? Are storytelling survivors showing a lack of respect for the dead -- or are they celebrating an extended *Yahrzeit* (Yiddish, “anniversary”), where family members of the deceased light candles and pray in acknowledgement of the departed ones? The candles are only intended to burn for twenty-four hours, but perhaps the severity of the Holocaust necessitates an extended, poetic version of the *Yahrzeit*, an homage to those permanently silenced. Perhaps Beckett’s sentiment could be reversed: silence is a desecration of speech -- and those who would endeavour to speak do so in aid of those who cannot.

### **Faithfully Representing the Holocaust: A Secular Possibility?**

If this terrain for Jewish artists, then, is “slippery,” it is emphatically treacherous for non-Jewish writers. While the Holocaust has become an important part of the American consciousness, the control over its representation, many would argue, should lie solely with those who have a verifiable claim to Jewish history. Critics of cultural appropriation would no doubt view Holocaust representation by Gentiles as theft, but the real “slippery moral terrain” appears when considering the issue from the perspective of those who believe in cross-cultural exchange rather than in appropriation. Blu Greenberg, the wife of Rabbi Irving Greenberg, remembers favouring “exclusively Jewish commemoration of the Holocaust,” noting that it was “a moment to withdraw into the embrace of one’s own group.” However, she later attended an interfaith Yom Hashoah ceremony, and found it “moving and comforting to see Christians share tears with us” (247).<sup>84</sup> As previously noted, the final two decades of the twentieth century witnessed a marked increase in the

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<sup>84</sup> Non-Jewish interest in the Holocaust in America is almost always ascribed to Christians; other faiths are rarely mentioned in this context.

American interest in all things pertaining to the Holocaust, as well as a gradual Jewish inclination to reveal more details of the atrocity. Indeed, Mrs. Greenberg's comments indicate a recent willingness (on the part of American Jews) to share their memories with non-Jews, and to include them in the delicate process of remembering. But the chasm between this willingness and the transference of authorised representation to Gentiles is immense: it is one thing to share a story, and quite another to yield ownership of that story.

In her essay for *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, Tresa Grauer queries the essence of Judaism, and identifies four ways in which we can measure Jewishness. The first three are most obvious: Grauer lists blood (if one's mother is Jewish); language (if one speaks Hebrew or Yiddish); and religiosity (if one lives according to Jewish law) as strong indicators of Jewishness. However, her fourth criterion recalls the benefits of Jewish Americans writing about the Holocaust; she lists the author's "themes" -- that is, if the text deals with Jewish issues, such as the Holocaust -- as an identifying facet of one's Jewishness. If Art Spiegelman is "more" Jewish because he explores Jewish issues in his texts, can a non-Jew who writes about the same issues assume partial Jewish identity? Hilene Flanzbaum's own essay in *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (1999), examines John Berryman's prize-winning short story, "The Imaginary Jew," published in the Autumn, 1945 issue of the *Kenyon Review*. Berryman's protagonist is a southern boy at a New York college who is attacked after being mistaken for a Jew (and who refuses to deny his attackers' assumptions of his Jewishness). Though Berryman has no Jewish pedigree, his story met with little criticism, or comments of cultural appropriation. Indeed, Flanzbaum claims Berryman's purposeful affiliation with Jews as a comment upon the "most recognizable feature of Jewish identity [:] victimhood" (30); it would seem that the author's sympathy for the plight of the Jews (coupled with its publication date -- too soon after the end of the war for scholars to

fully comprehend its implications) saves him from the type of “scrutiny” that Furman proposed.

But what of Sylvia Plath’s 1966 poem, “Daddy,” in which the speaker assumes the identity of a Jew to her father’s Nazi? Is her politically-provocative imagery “appropriate”? She claims, “I have always been scared of you” (meaning her father), and writes, “I thought every German was you / ... / Chuffing me off like a Jew. / A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen. / I began to talk like a Jew. / I think I may well be a Jew” (in “Ariel,” lines 41, 29, 32-35). For a moment, let us ignore the issue of authorial “rights,” and instead focus on the *impact* of these lines: the simple audacity of Plath’s usage of these images achieves an extreme reaction. The dissonance in Plath’s extended metaphor, in respect to the actual plight of the speaker, can be understood in two ways: primarily, critics argue, applying imagery of the Holocaust to individual difficulties cheapens the rhetorical weight of the original notion. For a disgruntled employee to casually refer to his authoritarian boss as a “Nazi” inherently (and ignorantly) devalues the essence of the history behind that term. However, the pervasiveness of Holocaust consciousness is so widespread that Plath’s intent is immediately obvious; the use of Holocaust imagery functions like a stereotype, giving the reader a recognisable medium through which to understand the poet’s intention.

Easy access, however, is not the same as authorial pedigree, which forces the poem into the realm of ethics: does Plath have the *right* to use this imagery in the ways in which she does? Or at all? Has our revulsion at Holocaust imagery dulled to the point that we, the reader, can accept such a metaphor as a diatribe against figurative imprisonment, without questioning its political content and context? I would argue that the response to this query depends almost entirely upon the type of readers we are; if we are “lay” readers -- that is, not scholars -- then the extended metaphor of the sado-masochistic Nazi-Jew relationship of “Daddy” could appear

reasonable. Indeed, a website devoted to Sylvia Plath's work cites a comment from one of its users, who claims that she "found [the] poem cathartic and felt I understood every line on a visceral level without having to analyse it" (Nekai, May 11, 2007). However, the scholarly reader would be more likely to take umbrage at Plath's appropriation of this cultural experience, given an awareness of its context.

Finally, let us consider a more convoluted example of the theft of intellectual property: the publication of Ellen Feldman's novel, *The Boy Who Loved Anne Frank* (2005). Feldman (a Jewish American author) reconstructs history to fit the supposition that Peter Van Pels (the young boy whose family shared the annex with the Franks in Amsterdam) had, in fact, survived the war. Feldman's inspiration for this novel began with a 1994 trip to the Anne Frank House, wherein a curator supposedly told her that Peter's fate was unconfirmed (which she soon found out was false; Peter died on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1945, on the march from Auschwitz to Mauthausen). Still, Feldman proceeded to write a book that envisages what Peter's life might have been like in America: the reader witnesses his refusal to admit that he is Jewish, and his subsequent psychiatric trauma as a result of his inability to discuss his past. *The Boy Who Loved Anne Frank* has, tellingly, been classified as "Juvenile Fiction" by *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, although the *New York Times Book Review* (May 29, 2005) listed this novel as one of its Editor's Choices. Various reviewers deem Feldman's novel "interesting," but none comments on the sheer audacity of the author -- to assume ownership of arguably the best-known story of the Holocaust, to hitch her proverbial wagon to the icon that is Anne Frank.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, any potential "interest" of this story is overshadowed by the author's unauthorised appropriation of the tale of Anne Frank. Ironically, Feldman herself tackles notions of authenticity within the text of her novel when she calls attention to Austrian actress Gusti Huber's

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<sup>85</sup> Tellingly, though the novel's title certainly puts Anne Frank's name to good use, the novel itself refuses to comment on the relationship between Anne and Peter that so fascinated readers of the original diary. Of further interest is the October 9, 1994, edition of the *New York Times*, which lists Ellen Feldman's marriage to Stephen P. Reibel: "Jean Kotkin, a leader of the Society for Ethical Culture ... officiated."

portrayal of Anne Frank's mother, Edith, in both the film and theatre versions of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Feldman, however, claims that during the war, Huber "charmed" Nazis; she cites Herbert G. Luft, who writes that "at the very same time Anne was murdered in Bergen-Belsen, Gusti was busy shooting a screen comedy ... [she] amused the citizens of the Third Reich with her starring performance" (1956). Huber, Feldman suggests, had no "right" to portray such a sympathetic Jewish character as Mrs. Frank, though Feldman herself hypocritically ignores her own inauthentic portrayal of Peter van Pels. Of course, Feldman is not a Nazi supporter, but the irony of her disdain for Huber remains.

What conclusion may we draw from examples of literature whose authors have various tenuous links (if at all) to the Holocaust? Perhaps we might conceive of a four-tier scale of proprietorship, wherein the most justified Holocaust storytellers are the survivors, followed by their children, followed by Jewish Americans, and lastly, non-Jews. Though the final classification of storytellers is also the least entitled, does this mean that they are disqualified from even an attempt? If the "restraint" of those who "are not eye-witnesses in any sense of the term" -- and who remain silent on the subject of the Holocaust -- is "to be held admirable" (Budick, 2003: 217), must we similarly castigate those who do not hold their counsel? A response to this question can be neither scientific nor consistent: sometimes, as in the case of Sylvia Plath, an artist's appropriation of another culture's intellectual property kindles much controversy, and sometimes, as in the case of Ellen Feldman, the artist escapes without being subjected to any difficult scrutiny. Certainly, both the specific content of the work, as well as the manner in which it is presented, contribute to its reception (conjuring decidedly Rousseauian notions of authorial responsibility<sup>86</sup>), although there is no formula for predicting how a work will be received. Non-Jews are not necessarily qualified to become storytellers of the

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<sup>86</sup> Rousseauian notions of authorial responsibility emphasise that the author is wholly responsible for the reception of his work; the reader has no control over the process.

Holocaust (though paradoxically that very act may bestow some degree of Jewishness upon them); they must be especially aware of their work's potential for criticism; they must endeavour to create a tactful, faithful version of the events of the Holocaust; and they must present this version in a manner so as not to seem self-aggrandising or desirous of material wealth or notoriety. In order to escape condemnation, a story of the Holocaust, whether it is written by a survivor or a Gentile, must be told simply because "it is ... impossible ... not to speak of" it (Wiesel, *Jew Today*, 200).

### **Art, or Disfiguration? Poetry after the Holocaust**

Lawrence L. Langer contends that "there is something disagreeable, almost dishonourable, in the conversion of the suffering of the victims into works of art" (1975: 1). Indeed, Langer cites philosopher T.W. Adorno, who claimed that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. Langer and Adorno raise an interesting point: is the entirety of my previous discussion moot -- is it not a question of *who* should write the literature of the Holocaust, but of whether it should be written at all? I think it is fair to say that there is intrinsic merit in the revelation of Holocaust stories, for many of the reasons mentioned earlier (for example, to bestow lessons of humanity and inhumanity upon an ignorant public, to provide catharsis for the storyteller, or to ensure that such events are not repeated); what is subtly important, though, are the *aesthetics* of Holocaust representation. Adam Gopnik writes, of *Maus*, that "Spiegelman has found another way to do what all artists who have made the Holocaust their subject have tried to do: to stylize horror without aestheticizing it" (31). Elie Wiesel's *Night* (his recounting of his own experiences in Auschwitz and Buchenwald) is not a significant narrative because it constitutes a beautiful piece of writing; it is significant because of the veracity of Wiesel's words. To fictionalise --

to *aestheticise* -- is to navigate that slippery moral terrain of which Furman writes, to “steal” the narrative of the Holocaust from “the Jews who were its victims” (Alexander, 195). In the chapter of Offutt’s second memoir, *No Heroes*, entitled “Poetry Saves Irene,” the author’s mother-in-law describes her experiences with art while she was in the camps:

We had a poetry group behind the latrine ... We gathered together behind the toilets, where we were safe. Each one prepared something. We had pieces of paper from me because I worked in the paper factory. Elona wrote a poem and we listened, and then each one, whatever they could deliver, a poem, some thoughts, some hopes, some descriptions. When I think back, this is like a little sunshine opening. It was not allowed to do that. That was taking a big chance, but we did. These little gatherings made a big difference and I was not taken. I was not destroyed. Maybe outside, but not mentally. Poetry saved me. (NH, 117)

Just as this chapter examined who has the “right” to tell the stories of the Holocaust, the following chapter will discuss Chris Offutt’s “right” to include the war-time recollections of his parents-in-law in *No Heroes*. This discussion will also consider the potential effects Offutt’s work could have on both southern fiction and the literature of the Holocaust, as the boundaries of each gradually weaken and expand. The implications of a non-Jew writing a Holocaust narrative find kinship with those of a southerner writing about something other than the South. Both threaten to deconstruct the integrity of their entity (the Holocaust experience, or the South) -- but equally, both have the ability to broaden its borders and force a reconsideration of exactly what representatives of that entity must address.

## Chapter 10

### Breaking the Oath of Silence: Entitlement and Responsibility in *No Heroes: A Memoir of Coming Home*

In *Dvar Hashavu'a*, the weekly magazine of Tel-Aviv newspaper *Davar*, Elie Wiesel writes that “if someone else could have written my stories ... I would not have written them” (1984). Wiesel’s comment raises several of the principal issues in Holocaust literature: that the process of writing stories of the Holocaust is an unenviable task, but that their importance supersedes the emotional or psychological discomfort of their witness; and that the stories belong to those who have experienced the Holocaust -- “someone else” cannot write them. However, there is ambiguity in this final point: does Wiesel mean that “someone else” (for example, a Gentile) could not write these stories because they did not witness the events -- because they did not possess the experience from which to construct the literature? Or, has Wiesel issued a moral imperative, as in, “someone else *is not allowed*” to write these stories? This chapter will attempt to dispel this ambiguity, using Chris Offutt’s second autobiography, *No Heroes: A Memoir of Coming Home* (2002),<sup>87</sup> as an illustration of the difficulties that Holocaust literature written by “someone else” might encounter.

Offutt’s *No Heroes* finds an unlikely kinship with Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*. Both authors are driven to present messages of political and social import to their audience. Spiegelman’s comments in a 1988 interview, when asked about the impetus behind the creation of *Maus*, presage statements Offutt would later make about his commitment to dispelling the unflattering myths of Appalachia. Spiegelman says that he “wanted to deal with subject matter that could matter” (Groth, 1988); Offutt echoes Spiegelman, and claims, again, that “Appalachia has

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<sup>87</sup> *No Heroes: A Memoir of Coming Home* will be referred to in the remainder of this chapter as, simply, ‘*No Heroes*.’



many problems specific to the region which I didn't want to ignore ... I hoped to depict life in the hills as similar to life anywhere" ("Getting it Straight"). To create the two volumes of *Maus*, Spiegelman borrowed from his personal and cultural history to tell the story of his father's survival of the Holocaust. Until *No Heroes*, Offutt had only championed the plight of Appalachia, using his work as a means of challenging stereotypical preconceptions of mountain culture. Both Spiegelman and Offutt experiment with the autobiographical genre, adapting it to better represent their respective causes. Spiegelman's use of animal imagery and, indeed, the form of the graphic novel, are more conspicuous than Offutt's subtle revision of the prototypical southern memoir, but the conflation of the personal with the political is obvious in each author's work. However, without the publication of *No Heroes*, the connection between Offutt and Spiegelman would remain largely theoretical.

With Offutt's widened political focus in *No Heroes* -- he now concerns himself not merely with Appalachia but also with the representation of his father-in-law's experiences of the Holocaust -- the link to Spiegelman's *Maus* becomes both more substantial, and more complicated. Indeed, Offutt acknowledges his familiarity with *Maus* within *No Heroes*, as he discovers his son reading it one day. He thinks that "reading *Maus* is a good way for Sam to understand history," though Offutt's wife is concerned about the vividness of Spiegelman's drawings (NH, 92). Nevertheless, Offutt's experience of the Holocaust is tenuous, and temporal: though his parents-in-law are Polish Jews, survivors of various Nazi concentration camps during the war, the Holocaust is not part of Offutt's personal history. Spiegelman, of course, is the son of a Holocaust survivor, and therefore his determination to represent the Holocaust -- as part of his personal and collective past -- is less potentially controversial. Finally, though, both Spiegelman and Offutt do what "someone else" could not do for Elie Wiesel: tell these difficult stories, and thereby become both the "enabler of the testimony ... as well as [its] guardian" (Laub (see

Felman and Laub), 58). The remarkably similar metanarratives in both *Maus* and *No Heroes* reflect each author's consciousness of the magnitude of their task, and their resolve to tell these stories responsibly and faithfully. Spiegelman has a conversation with his wife in the second *Maus* book, wherein he confesses that he feels "so inadequate trying to represent a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams ... Maybe I ought to forget the whole thing." His wife advises him to "just keep it honest, honey" (*Maus II*, 16). Similarly, Offutt wonders if he "can pull this off;" Arthur advises him in much the same way that Spiegelman's wife had done, as he tells Offutt to be faithful to the story, to resist the temptation to valorise the experience of the Holocaust. "What?" asks Offutt. "Why not?" Arthur simply replies that "heroes are not human," and leaves it at that (NH, 137, 79).<sup>88</sup> Spiegelman and Offutt share kinship because they are both consumed by the need to present an honest recounting of events, an anti-narrative to the stories of war-time heroism.

*No Heroes* is precisely organised: there are fifty-nine short chapters, plus a prologue and an epilogue. Of these fifty-nine, thirty are the stories of Offutt's parents-in-law, Arthur and Irene Gross (Arthur has sixteen to Irene's fourteen), and nine detail Offutt's contemporaneous conversations with Arthur, or the author's introspection about the task of writing this book -- the metanarrative. The remaining twenty chapters make no mention of Arthur or Irene; rather, they focus on Offutt's return to Kentucky and his reintegration into small-town life. Granted, the combined length of these chapters is considerably greater than those devoted to Arthur and Irene, and yet the paradox is self-evident: in a memoir ostensibly about 'coming home,' only a third of its chapters actually takes that as their subject.

In his chapter entitled, "Beginning the Book," Offutt notes that "the odd thing about this book is I never set out to write it" (NH, 62). This book -- which comprises the unintentional juncture of two radically divergent narratives -- becomes as much

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<sup>88</sup> This recalls Sally Grubman's earlier protestation against the portrayal of Holocaust survivors as valorous.

about the process and the responsibility of writing as about the content of the narratives. In a conversation with Arthur, the author reveals that he is worried about the synthesis of the two stories, and wonders if “the ending will pull it all together.” He has no plan for this book, but the inclusion of his metanarrative illuminates the process. While pondering the number of his many departures and returns from and to Kentucky, the author notes that “the mathematics of time is as arbitrary as it is precise” (NH, 40); precision or arbitrariness, of course, depends on perspective. The precise framework upon which *No Heroes* -- a supposedly arbitrary collection of narratives -- rests indicates the author’s devotion to the responsibilities of his craft. Offutt could have presented a polished, edited final version of *No Heroes* (which of course he does, to the extent of structural precision), wherein he removed himself as the architect of this memoir. The fact that he does not do this emphasises Offutt’s role not as creator, but as engineer. He then becomes not just the memoirist, but another iteration of the character of Chris Offutt, the man who returns home to Kentucky to bring literature to the hills. While Offutt is determined that Arthur and Irene’s history will be accurately recorded, he is equally concerned with portraying his fellow Kentuckians sympathetically. In allowing the stark simplicity of Arthur and Irene’s memories to speak for themselves, the author reveals his priorities as those not of creativity but of responsibility; ultimately, he is the curator of these disparate sections of history, entrusted with their safekeeping and their integrity. As any curator must be, Offutt is consumed by the manner in which he presents these histories; his sense of responsibility reflects his awareness of the control he exerts over the reception of his work.

In keeping with Chris Offutt’s attention to duality, this chapter will discuss *No Heroes* from two perspectives: as an examination of the author’s personal journey prior to and during the writing of this book and, equally, as a consideration of this work’s contribution to larger theoretical issues of cultural appropriation and cross-

cultural exchange. Several recurring themes will be discussed in relation to each or both of these issues: Offutt's redefining of his personal and collective history; his ever-troubled relationship with his father and the subsequent impact of his bond with his father-in-law; the elusive nature of home; the responsibility of writing; and the inclusion of the narratives of Arthur and Irene. Finally, this chapter will contemplate the ethics of *No Heroes* as a Holocaust text, and the cultural marriage of morality with aesthetic quality. Must the two ideas co-exist, or can something be aesthetically successful though morally bankrupt? This is indeed challenging conceptual territory for the stereotypical "southern" writer, who must constantly negotiate that difficult space between the bid for commercial success and loyalty to the region.

### **Unleashed History: The Legacy of *No Heroes***

The disparate narrative threads that evolved into *No Heroes* originated as a series of the author's journal entries, and tape-recorded conversations recounting Arthur and Irene's wartime experiences. By the mid-1990s, Offutt realised what Elie Wiesel and countless others already had: that the Holocaust survivors (in this case, his in-laws) were becoming elderly, and their deaths would soon be imminent. Originally, these "audiotapes were intended for the kids;" Offutt feels strongly that his sons (Jewish through maternal lineage) should know the history of their mother's parents. The author comes to this conclusion after lunch with his own mother one day; he thinks about how she "never talked of her childhood and had told me nothing of her mother. I don't even know my grandmother's name" (NH, 112). Offutt does not want his children to be as ignorant of their past as he is of his own. He writes earlier that his "family had no actual heirlooms," and he wants more for his sons. Just as he hoped that *The Same River Twice* would endow his sons with a lasting

legacy, Offutt hopes that the audiotapes of Arthur and Irene will become a similar heritage, giving each son a tangible reminder of their cultural history.<sup>89</sup>

*No Heroes*, however, is also Offutt's attempt to excise the guilt he feels over an early childhood memory. He can recall seeing a car full of teenagers driving past his house, with "a large black swastika ... painted on each door. I had never seen that symbol before. I thought the car was cool, the driver was cool, the loud music roaring was cool. I especially thought the swastika was cool." Inexplicably to his adult self, the ten-year-old Offutt "decided to carve [the swastika] into the lid of a wooden box on my mother's dresser [with] the sharp end of a diaper [pin] ... When my father asked if I had done it, I said yes and told him about the car. He said the box had belonged to my grandmother. It was the only item my mother had from her. I never saw the box again" (NH, 112-113). His family may have had no heirlooms, and his mother may have never spoken of her own mother -- but Offutt shares in the responsibility for this silence. In writing *No Heroes*, Offutt replaces the diaper pin with a pencil, and etches out a new family legacy; this one, he hopes, can repair the damage he did as a child.

Though the past does not always contain pleasant memories, Offutt wants to stop his family's determination to bury their history (although he too has been reluctant to speak of his childhood, as shown by the chronology of *The Same River Twice*). Offutt admits that his "memories don't sparkle with polish" (NH, 216); when discussing his old friend Vondelle's husband, Offutt can in part identify with this man from "beyond the county line. He had no people. No one knew his history ... Without a past, he had no enemies, no fears, no obligations" (NH, 29). Here, Offutt simultaneously recognises that even though the past is not always "sparkling," even though ignorance of it, or disdain for it, may be attractive, he knows that to have "no people" or "history" is worse. Fears and obligations are the price to pay for inclusion

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<sup>89</sup> Just as in "Old of the Moon," where Tar Cutler records traditional Appalachian stories for his grandchildren onto audiotapes.

in a community, a feeling of attachment to something more important than the personal -- a lesson that Offutt emphasised through the character of Virgil Caudill in *The Good Brother*.

Since first moving away from home as a teenager, Offutt had returned on no fewer than five occasions, each time attempting to carve out a life for himself in this remote corner of Appalachia. Unfortunately, during each visit, prospects of a better life elsewhere presented themselves, prompting the author to leave once more. In 1998, though, Offutt becomes determined to permanently install his young family in the hills. He applies for a teaching position at Morehead State University, his alma mater; his “main desire was an opportunity to give back to the community ... to teach writing in a region where thirty percent of the people were functionally illiterate” (NH, 26-7). He has visions of himself as a specific sort of hero -- the bearer of hope for those who do not believe anything better lays in wait for them beyond their insular world. As in *The Same River Twice*, Offutt actively solicits a legacy, wherein he imagines himself to be the inspiration of success for his downtrodden kinsmen. The return to Kentucky is actually a contrivance for his future, an imagined sequel to the legacy he began to construct in his first memoir. Additionally, moving his family back to Kentucky is an attempt to give his children a sense of communal history: he does not want them to grow up rootless strangers in a community where they have no family beyond their parents. Kentucky, he tells his sons, is “the promised land of milk and honey. There were no bullies in paradise, no burglars, bad guys, or bums. Everyone loved children. The boys could walk barefoot, have pets, go fishing, explore the woods” (NH, 40). Offutt wants his sons to have the type of childhood he imagines he *could* have had, had his family life been as happy as the time he spent in the woods and in the community.

Giving his sons the opportunity to claim the potentially perfect childhood in Kentucky is also a chance for Offutt to revisit his past, to sculpt it into something

better than it was. He takes his sons to the public library, and finds his signature on a book's check-out card, "dated 1968. Holding a book that had passed through my hands so long ago gave me a sudden chill that drifted into bliss." Offutt then makes a pile of other books he had read as a child for his son, "enthralled that he would read them at the same age as I had" (NH, 69). He also introduces his children to his first-grade teacher, Mrs. Jayne (to whom the book is dedicated), emphasising the important role she had played in his childhood. He writes, "All my grandparents were dead. I wanted Sam and James to know Mrs. Jayne" (NH, 66). Offutt sees himself as a modern incarnation of Mrs. Jayne, a teacher whose students "loved her ... in the fierce way of children who express elemental emotion with every cell in their bodies" (NH, 65). In revisiting the landscape and the characters in his own history, Offutt wants to create better opportunities for a new generation of Appalachian scholars. "When I look at it now," Offutt claims, "I can't believe that somebody didn't say, "Chris, why don't you go to school somewhere else? You're a real smart kid" (Grant, 2002).

Offutt hopes that, as a university professor in Morehead, he might be an inspiration to other "real smart kids," negating the need for them to leave Appalachia to become educated. His earlier journal entries reflect his optimism for the success of such a venture, and he writes enthusiastically:

I had never felt so happy, so enthusiastic for life. I intended to grow old here. I would be buried among the trees. Wildflowers would grow on my grave. Until then, I would help young people understand themselves, and provide an example of the potential for life beyond the hills. I had come home to give as much as possible. Eventually I might move into politics. (42)

Offutt's fervour eventually cools, as he realises that his passion cannot counteract the crippling nature of a culture traditionally impoverished, undereducated, and -- most vitally -- resistant to change. His best student, Eugene, drops out of school, and he realises that the most help he can give his second-best student, Sandra, is to facilitate

her transfer to a “real school” away from Morehead (NH, 250). Believing he has failed in his mission, Offutt becomes

embarrassed by my naïve dreams of return. It now seemed ridiculous that one of my long-term goals had been to run for political office. I felt like a hypocrite ... I had followed the historic path of every prior attempt to help the region -- VISTA, church groups, the War on Poverty -- arriving full of energy and plans, and swiftly becoming overwhelmed by the problems entrenched within the hills. (NH, 244)

Elizabeth Kirkland Cahill writes that “again and again, Offutt undergoes the reverse alchemy of home, which transforms you from the gold you think you’ve become to the lead you were before you left” (21). More alarming, however, is Offutt’s realisation that Appalachia is not quite the land of milk and honey that he had promised his sons; Sam is needlessly penalised for missing class to go on an educational field trip, and claims that “school was like an old movie where the teacher stood in front of the class and lectured, and the students couldn’t ask questions.” Offutt recognises that “nothing had changed” since he was in school: he had “come home to help my people and wound up hurting my son” (NH, 197). His primary aims in returning home -- to improve the quality of the local education, and to give his sons a chance at an idyllic childhood -- both fail, rather spectacularly. Instead of restructuring the past in the present, Offutt must witness the simple devastation of his history repeating itself in his children and his students. The optimism which demarcates the conclusion of *The Same River Twice* and the beginning of *No Heroes* gradually dissipates in the course of this second memoir, leaving Offutt to question -- once again -- the nature of the legacy he desperately seeks.

Offutt’s vision of a tangible, recorded legacy is shared by Lucille Odom, the narrator of Josephine Humphreys’ 1988 novel, *Rich in Love*. Therein, Lucille journeys toward adulthood, trying to situate her life in a broader context. She is



precocious and -- more importantly -- astute. Lucille asks, "What good is a life if you can't remember its milestones and themes? That is the aim of history, to *get it down on paper*, to be the official human memory" (52-53). Offutt hopes that for his sons, "Kentucky would give [them] history" (NH, 42), but the work of *No Heroes* continues that of Offutt's first memoir; it constitutes several layers of family history -- obviously, those belonging to Arthur and Irene, but also Offutt's ongoing struggle to create an heirloom that will exist after he does not. By writing this memoir, Offutt removes his children's need for the audiotapes, or even Kentucky: the combination of narratives in *No Heroes* will 'give' his sons history. "Getting it down on paper" fortifies the family's history, and creates a basis for its future. The author writes later that Arthur, is "the page on which history was written. Arthur is the book" (NH, 200). Offutt is not quite fair to himself, though: Arthur's story is *part* of the book, but *No Heroes* would not exist without its writer. Arthur provides the rudimentary material, but Offutt creates its aesthetic form. *The Same River Twice* is Offutt's sons' paternal, Appalachian legacy; *No Heroes*, he hopes, will become its maternal counterpart.

### **My Father (-in-law) Bleeds History: The Creation of No Heroes**

Chris Offutt's inclusion of the history of Arthur and Irene Gross in *No Heroes* is simultaneously an exclusion of facets of his own history. During the year he spends at home in Kentucky, Offutt speaks extensively with Arthur on the telephone and in person; his respect and admiration for the older man are evident. What is also made clear by these conversations, especially in juxtaposition with the author's attempts to reconcile his relationship with his own father, is Offutt's palpable and persistent need for a viable filial relationship. The reader learns in *The Same River Twice* that Offutt's father, Andrew, is "a stranger who never left the house," a man possessed of a "phenomenal and unpredictable rage" (SR, 59, 60). Offutt's early

wanderings throughout America mask a more subtle search for alternate father figures: Bill, the gunnery sergeant in Vietnam; Barney, the circus' elephant handler; and Captain Jack, who allowed Offutt to sleep in the bedroom of his deceased son. *No Heroes* constitutes Offutt's discovery of a more permanent replacement for Andrew Offutt: Arthur. The author's comparisons of these two men, however, are subtle: Arthur, who used ingenuity and determination to help him survive the death camps, is a humble man with a firm moral compass. Andrew, on the other hand, wrote pornography for the latter part of his career, alienated his children, and has a misplaced arrogance. After lunch with his son, he mars a compliment he made to a "simple" man by bragging, "I made his day" (NH, 208-9).

The underlying contention is obviously a statement about validity: one man's innate worthiness has been validated by the manner in which he has negotiated his history, and the other man's character is invalidated by selfishness and a total inability to empathise. The most startling example of how these two men differ occurs during a dinner in a Kentucky restaurant. Arthur, the reader knows, has witnessed and withstood some of the greatest atrocities of the twentieth century; Andrew, the reader discovers, "suffered a severe asthma attack at his physical for air force induction during the Korean War. He was spared combat and never had asthma again" (NH, 202). Arthur's experiences have encouraged his pre-existing appreciation for humanity and beauty, while Andrew's conscious and repetitive retreat from duty has fostered his egocentrism. In this restaurant in Kentucky, while entertaining Arthur and Irene Gross as his guests, Andrew Offutt displays inhumanity in the most cowardly and vulgar manner. Chris Offutt remembers:

In a far corner of the restaurant sat a mother with a crying baby. My father stood and pretended to draw a pistol from an imaginary holster. He slowly and deliberately screwed a silencer onto the barrel. He extended his arm, aimed his finger at the baby, and pretended to shoot it three times. He returned the pistol to its invisible holster and continued eating in a casual

manner. Arthur and Irene looked at each other and then at their plates. They said nothing for a long time. (NH, 202)

Andrew Offutt's behaviour would have been grossly inappropriate in any company; that he chose to enact this gruesome mime in front of two people who actually have witnessed the murder of children demonstrates, at best, a total lack of awareness of acceptable conduct. At worst, Andrew Offutt displays an intentional desire to give emotional pain to the Grosses. Either way, the portrait that Chris Offutt paints of his father is neither flattering nor admiring.

The author uses this anecdote to introduce a chapter entitled, "Lunch with Alpha Three," which describes an afternoon between the two Offutt men. This section serves as the final punctuation of a relationship already fraught with difficulties. *The Same River Twice* described the long silences between Chris and Andrew, the degradation of a son by his father, and a family held hostage by the fierce temper of its patriarch. Almost ten years on, with the publication of *No Heroes*, the author is still trying to navigate a workable liaison with his father. With the sense of finality to which this memoir aspires comes their realisation that this relationship will likely never improve. And yet, when his father calls to arrange a lunch date, the author tells his wife, "Maybe it'll be a memorable lunch. I hope so" (NH, 203). He is perpetually hoping for an improvement, and in this case, for an opportunity to rewrite the family history in a more favourable light. The reply from Offutt's wife, though, is more dynamic; she says, "You always hope things like that ... What you should do is say something meaningful instead of waiting for your father to" (NH, 203). Rita obviously knows that any amelioration of the father/son relationship will have to be instigated by the son; the father is either ignorant of their problems or unwilling to make the changes necessary to strengthen his bond with his son.

As Chris drops off his father after lunch, he decides to heed Rita's advice, and tells Andrew, "I love you." His father merely nods. Chris decides to push further,

and reveals that his “biggest source of pain ... is the tension between us. I hoped that coming home would help fix it.” In the face of his son’s vulnerability, Andrew Offutt replies, “You are quicker to take offense at me than anyone on the planet” (NH, 209). In making this statement, Andrew is removing personal responsibility for the degradation of the relationship, placing it firmly upon his son. By accusing his son of being easily offended, he is repudiating the notion that he is offensive. Any insult that Chris Offutt assumes, then, is of his own creation, and not the result of any actual slight that his father may have made. In spite of his best efforts, Chris Offutt has no real chance of ever becoming close to his father; as long as Andrew Offutt refuses to recognise his complicity in the breakdown of this relationship, his son can have no hope for a better future, or perhaps most disappointingly, no hope for the chance to nurture a positive family history.

### **The Cradle of My Civilisation: Offutt Comes Home**

Chris Offutt’s relationship with his home town of Haldeman, Kentucky, is well-documented both in his fiction and in his memoirs. His fictive characters -- in *The Good Brother* and *Out of the Woods*, especially -- all display a devotion to this region and an awareness of its limitations. *The Same River Twice* clearly demonstrates fidelity to this place (Offutt spreads Kentucky dirt on the floor of the Municipal Building in Manhattan for his wedding ceremony), as well as his inability to reconcile his family-oriented lifestyle with the stifling environment of his hometown. This notion -- of the difficulty of enacting allegiance to a place -- is one that has been explored in traditional southern literature (for example, in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*), and continues to be a source of internal controversy for the new cohort of contemporary writers. Recall Richard Ford’s musings of home, as discussed previously in Chapter 7:

“What is home then, you might wonder? The place you first see daylight, or the place you choose for yourself? Or is it the someplace you just can’t keep from going back to, though the air there’s grown less breathable, the future’s over, where they really don’t want you back, and where you once left on a breeze without a rearward glance?” (14)

In leaving Kentucky at the age of eighteen, Chris Offutt perhaps intended to go without a rearward glance, but soon found that home informed every aspect of his new life in New York City. He lived with other Kentuckians, was branded an outsider because of his southern accent, and found it difficult to adapt to the harried lifestyle of the urban environment. Almost a year after he left home, he returned for what was to become the first of many inward journeys to the Appalachians. Home, then, to Offutt, is both the place where he first saw daylight and the place he chooses for himself. During those first fifteen years of adulthood selectively chronicled in *The Same River Twice*, he established a pattern of departure and return, wherein he ventures forth at the prospect of a better job or a more interesting destination -- but he always comes back to Kentucky.

His journey home, then, as recorded in *No Heroes*, is merely another element in this pattern, though it is presented with finality. Offutt believes that this trip is the last one he will make, and settles himself and his family with the intention of staying permanently. It is only after the settlement period, and after he declares his intentions of trying to improve the education system in eastern Kentucky, that he starts to notice that the air has indeed become less breathable. His children are unhappy in school, his wife is pitied for being Jewish, and -- worst of all -- his efforts at promoting creative writing at the college are stymied by suspicious colleagues and the debilitating effects of poverty in the rural landscape. As much as Offutt believed that he could make a meaningful difference to the futures of his students, he comes to realise that the problems he faces are not easily resolved. His fantasies about bringing poetry to the hills prove to be just that -- and he turns out to be less a hero

than he had envisaged. The author's plans for a life in his home are thwarted by the reality of that home. And yet, the conclusion of *No Heroes* indicates that those unsatisfactory and repetitive travels will continue until his death, as he reveals his desire to be buried in the woods of home. He writes, finally: "I want to stay home. I am ready to leave" (NH, 268). Certainly, Offutt must leave home, again, for the sake of his family, but it will always remain the place he "can't keep from going back to." The questions of Richard Ford, presented as an either/or dichotomy, a choice between definitions of home, are vindicated by their inclusion of all possible elements. Home -- as an abstract concept -- fluctuates in meaning, so that its only source of constancy is its presence, and its tumultuous relationship with those who claim it.

This conflict of home -- the war between desire and viability -- resonates in the work of other southern memoirists (like Brown, Bragg, Crews, Mason, etc.). Those southerners who have never left the South, perhaps more than the inhabitants of any other American region, claim allegiance to their home place without having ever experienced another. They seem to not need a point of comparison to be sure of their own worth; these southerners are convinced of the South's value, independent of external validation. In his 1983 report on southern cultural identity, *Southerners: The Social Psychology of Sectionalism*, John Shelton Reed compares the opinions of those southerners who have never been further than two hundred miles from home with those who have. Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, he notes that "region is seldom salient for Southerners who never leave the South, nor water, ordinarily, for fish" (36). Those southerners suffering a crisis of regional identity are those who *have* ventured further away from home; Reed terms the process of raising regional consciousness "reactive" (38), and argues that "southernness, like the identity of many other groups but perhaps more so, has been shaped and reinforced by conflict" (70). Furthermore, Reed quotes Sheldon Hackney's 1969 article in the

*American Historical Review*, which sardonically lists any such outside forces that might conflict with southernness: “abolitionists, the Union Army, carpetbaggers, Wall Street and Pittsburgh, civil rights agitators, the federal government, feminism, socialism, trade-unionism, Darwinism, Communism, atheism, daylight-saving time, and other by-products of modernity” (924-925). The South’s collective, historical tradition of preserving its identity by rejecting outside influence is manifested in its unwillingness to lend its citizens to the rest of America. The region’s deliberate insularity necessitates the participation of all southerners; those who choose either to leave or to import alien culture are “viewed with distrust and suspicion” (Brinkmeyer, 14).

Chris Offutt has been aware of this fact since his early, willing departure; he knew that “living anywhere else but Rowan County would mark me forever a stranger, and therefore suspect” (“The Hot Rod,” 2000). His relationship with home is demarcated by the oppositional factors of instinct and circumstance: his instincts lead him -- and have led him -- back to eastern Kentucky, but his circumstances perpetually take him away from home. A distinction should also be made between Offutt’s home as a physical environment, and as a collection of people. “Home,” for Offutt, is not, as it is for some, the place where his family resides; in a 1998 interview with Rhonda Reeves, he quoted Larry Brown’s statement that “it’s one thing to have a life in a place, and to be happy in it is quite another.” Certainly, Offutt’s life has taken him and his family away from Rowan County, which is home. Home in Kentucky, though, is not defined for Offutt by any allegiance to parents, siblings, or the house in which he was raised. He shows some attachment to his boyhood friends, but his definition of “home” is very much dominated by the natural environment. Offutt’s love of nature, emphasised in *The Same River Twice* as a central, formative aspect of his character, is a major facet of *No Heroes*. For Offutt, home is the tangible essence of the Kentucky woods, which have nurtured and

educated him all his life. Early on in the memoir, the author drives the length of the main street in Morehead, and glimpses the silhouette of the hills beyond. He writes, emphatically, that “these woods were the cradle of my civilization, my own promised land” (NH, 28). The significance of “my own promised land” does not become wholly apparent until Offutt begins to link together his narrative with that of Arthur and Irene, but the biblical metaphor is already important. The woods are Offutt’s Israel, his gift from God, his protected homeland.

Offutt’s memoirs and works of fiction are all remarkable for their lack of sentimentality; this is most conspicuous as the author writes about emotional incidents: his conversations with his father, or the experiences of his in-laws in the death camps. His writing style invites interpretation without channelling a personal, emotive response. In his essay, “The Shape of Appalachian Literature to Come,” (as featured in Jefferson Humphries and John Lowe’s *The Future of Southern Letters*), Fred Chappell interviews the fictional Wil Hickson on the role of sentimentality in the genre. Hickson declares: “Sentimentality has been the curse of Appalachian writing ever since the beginning ... I could go on all day and night listing Appalachian writers whom sentimentality has undermined.” The interviewer then asks, “Why do you consider sentimentality a special danger for Appalachian writers?” and Hickson responds, “The real insiders, the writers who were born and raised in the mountains and lived their lives there, are rarely sentimental” (56). To avoid sentimentality, then, is for an Appalachian writer to affirm his pedigree, to confirm his rightful position in the members-only club of authentic, home-grown authors. Offutt’s cognisance of an authentic sense of “Appalachian-ness,” though implied in *Kentucky Straight*, is blatant in *No Heroes*, as he begins the narrative with an instructive guide to Appalachia. Addressing the general “you,” he prepares a mandate for successful integration into mountain culture: “dress down except when you have to dress up, then wear your Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes ... Be polite to



everybody. Even if you are certain you have never seen this lady in your life, ask her how her family is ... Smile and nod, smile and nod. When a conversation ends, always say, "See you in church" (NH, 16).

The only instances in which the author displays any "rare" sentimentality are those in which he is in the woods, suggesting that this is the location where he is both most comfortable, and through which he feels most connected to the region and to himself. When Offutt accompanies an old friend to the hills to see a prospective home for his family, he discovers that the property includes "a section of wooded hill." He asks for a moment alone, and as he prepares himself to enter the woods, his reaction is visceral: "My mouth felt dry and my heart beat fast. For the first time in five years I stepped into the woods. The smell of fresh earth was instantly calming ... Everything was familiar -- the scent, the sight, the light, the dirt" (NH, 30). Within a few moments, Offutt is literally turned upside down; he laughs heartily, and then experiences a different sort of inversion. He "curled instinctively to an infant's posture of the womb, my eyes inches from last year's leaves. My laughter subsided to a ragged breathing. I surrendered to the years of stifled yearning, weeping with relief at lying alone in the woods of home" (NH, 31). Readers will recall Offutt's comfort in the womb of the hollow tree in *The Same River Twice*, and again recognise his innate need to be mothered by an inanimate object.

In essence, the woods for Offutt function as yet another form of surrogate parent, a role made especially vital in the face of the author's felt abandonment by his natural parents. Balance is restored in the woods (albeit not actual balance, as Offutt seems to spend more time upside down than right side up), and a return to these woods is a return to a place where everything makes sense again. In the woods, "time seemed to bend as if pressing a nail to a sheet of plastic until it punctured and I entered the intervening space. I had always lain here. I had never abandoned Kentucky. There was no pattern of departure and return, only the seasonal cycle of

death and life” (NH, 31). Here in the woods, there are no external complicating factors, merely the natural ebb and swell of life. Offutt ends this paragraph by noting that “a sense of contentment passed through me like the hint of summer rain. I had no mind, no thought.”

The author, of course, does have a thought: to stay in this place, in his home, permanently. He “walked out of the woods to the car” and said, “‘I’m buying this place’” (NH, 31). Offutt had never actually seen the inside of the house he was intent on buying; “home,” for him, has nothing to do with a house and everything to do with its land and the ability of that land to embrace him. He goes to the bank to arrange finances for the new property (which are approved, thanks to his embellishment of the truth) and then the enormity of the afternoon’s decisions becomes clear: “I had just bought a house without a job, based on crying in the woods. The hills surrounded me like the dome walls of a snow globe that you shake. Everything in my life was turned over and I was waiting for the flurries to settle. Home, I told myself. I’ve come home” (NH, 36-37). Sentimentality has propelled Offutt’s decisions; in buying this land and these woods, he has created a haven for himself, where he feels, truly, at home. That the rest of the narrative is as devoid of sentiment as the woods are replete with it indicates not that the author is incapable of or opposed to expressing sentiment; rather, it suggests that he consciously compartmentalises his feelings, releasing them only when he is contained within the womblike environment of the woods. He writes in *The Same River Twice* that “many people are afraid of the woods but that’s where I keep my fears” (18). The woods, as they have functioned as surrogate parents throughout Offutt’s life, now act as the repository for his emotions. He consciously “keeps” his feelings in the woods, safely stowed away and waiting for when he feels prepared to access them.

“At first,” Offutt writes in the chapter, “Beginning the Book,” “I thought the notion of home would bind the narratives -- my constant desire to return, [Arthur’s]

commitment to never go back. My original plan was for us to visit Poland together, but he refused" (NH, 64). The last chapter before the epilogue of *No Heroes* is entitled, "Arthur Thinks of Home," and is comprised of a mere paragraph. The conflation of the two narratives -- Offutt's, and his parents-in-law's -- comes ostensibly in this chapter, in Arthur's comments about home. This paragraph, though, fulfils Offutt's earlier prediction that Arthur's idea of home would be so divergent from Offutt's as to be only nominally connected. Throughout this memoir, Offutt grapples with his own overwhelming, instinctual need to live and work in eastern Kentucky; his connection with his home region is self-evident and formidable. Arthur's words, however, are an emphatic negation of Richard Ford's musings over the nature of home. Arthur says:

Home is a feeling, nothing more. Home is illusory, like love, then it disappears. Once you leave, you become a stranger. I lost my home and that's forever. I wouldn't go back to Poland. It breaks my heart. They don't want me there. All my memories are shadows, lousy shadows. That country is forsaken. Home is where I hang my head. (NH, 266)

Whereas home is paramount for Offutt, home is "nothing more" than a "feeling" for Arthur. Arthur and Irene Gross have lived in New York City since the end of the war, when they were both in their twenties. They were in their late teens when the war began, and so lived in free Poland for less than two decades. And yet, in a paragraph in which he thinks about "home," Poland is the location Arthur mentions by name. This country, the place Arthur "first saw daylight," has been taken from him -- he did not "leave" voluntarily, as he implies in this chapter. This confusion of passivity and activity is recurrent in Arthur's monologue; earlier, he assumes responsibility for his own fate during the war. He does not, of course, suggest that the attempted annihilation of the Jewish people was his fault, but he still feels "a tremendous disappointment with my inability to react. Why did I passively endure? There is so much a man can take and then he has to react in order to be

called a man” (NH, 211). Arthur’s anger is, of course, misplaced. He imagines a choice -- a capability of action -- where in fact there was none. Still, this guilt infuses his memories of that time, more than fifty years later. Arthur tells Offutt that “home is where I hang my head;” this at first seems like a malapropism, in which he exchanges “head” for “hat.” The general expression, “home is where I hang my hat,” attaches the feeling of home with the presence of oneself. However, Arthur chooses another expression -- to “hang my head” -- which connotes shame. The combination of these two idioms, coupled with Arthur’s previous admission of regret, creates an image of home for Arthur that is largely negative.

His pessimism, though, is consistent: “Arthur never thinks something is the best, but that it might be a little better. If he brings home the most delicious cake from the bakery, he worries that there was a tastier one he didn’t get.” Offutt quickly compares his own impulses to Arthur’s, and notes that “I, on the other hand, worry that there will never be a cake as good. The best cake in the house makes us both sad” (NH, 170). He later claims that “Arthur looks at the future and I at the past. Perhaps this is why we enjoy each other’s company -- an unlikely match surely -- an eighty-year-old Polish Jew and a forty-year-old Kentucky hillbilly. We recognize in each other what we crave for ourselves” (NH, 171). It is not some obtuse notion of “home” that connects the narratives -- though home plays an important role in supporting this connection; it is Offutt’s desire to establish a relationship, however tenuous, with a past that is not his own. Moreover, *No Heroes* is Offutt’s attempt to assuage the guilt of his own past. Offutt’s positioning of Arthur’s phrase, “Home is where I hang my head” -- as the final sentence of the main narrative -- and its guilt-ridden connotations, establish yet another theory of home: as much as Offutt has presented his relationship with Appalachia as an integral part of his being, Arthur no longer has the *luxury* of such a relationship. That, finally, is the conclusion of Offutt’s lengthy diatribe about home -- that he has taken his home place for granted,

and that his voluntary departures from (and returns to) Appalachia are facilitated by the certain knowledge that this region -- in his imagination and in reality -- will remain. When Thomas Wolfe wrote that “you can’t go home again,” he did not literally mean that such a voyage was impossible, merely that home is a fluctuating entity, and that you cannot return to exactly the same place that you once left. Leaving, though, is an indulgence that both Wolfe and Offutt engaged in voluntarily; Offutt’s many returns are trivialised by Arthur’s statement that Poland does not “want me there” (NH, 266).<sup>90</sup>

### **The Responsibility of Representation: Offutt Bears Witness**

The sections of *No Heroes* that exclude mention of Arthur and Irene’s Holocaust memories simultaneously explain the impetus behind Offutt’s decision to include these seemingly antithetical narratives. Offutt’s desire to revisit Appalachia in the hopes of creating a viable future for his children has proved fruitless; his goal of revolutionising the educational infrastructure of the region has been similarly unsuccessful; and he finally understands that his relationship with his father is irreparable. These realisations are not merely disappointing to Offutt; they jeopardise his ability to create and document the substantial legacy that he has made the goal of his writing. His conversations with Arthur and Irene thus become his salvation in the face of these overwhelming failures: the tape-recorded stories could have remained an invaluable part of his sons’ cultural history, but Offutt’s transformation of the tapes into *No Heroes* is a final attempt to get his legacy “down on paper.”

However, Offutt is conscious of the potential controversy *No Heroes* might create; the metanarrative both reflects the sense of responsibility he feels towards Arthur and Irene, and displays an awareness of the broader issues of Holocaust

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<sup>90</sup> These notions echo the sentiments of Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, as well as Offutt’s earlier story, “Melungeons.”

literature and cultural appropriation. Questions that critics would be sure to ask of *No Heroes* are posed pre-emptively by Offutt: “Will people care that a gentile is writing about the Holocaust? Am I appropriating Jewish material? Am I respectful enough? Why am I doing it in the first place?” (NH, 137). The presence of these questions within the memoir does not undercut critical analyses of their subject matter; rather, it adds another element of difficulty to the quandary. How should the reader interpret Offutt’s decision to publish the stories of Arthur and Irene as part of his own memoir, *in spite* of his awareness of the controversy it might cause? Is *No Heroes* a brave effort on Offutt’s part, knowing that he might be accused of cultural appropriation, but deciding that the stories of Arthur and Irene too valuable to overlook? Or, should we condemn *No Heroes* as a thinly-veiled attempt by Offutt to insert himself into the confines of a culture with which he can claim no history?

Let us first examine the latter, more selfish argument. Upon what basis could the reader castigate Offutt’s use of Arthur and Irene’s stories for *No Heroes*? Offutt’s representation of the Holocaust calls into question notions of cultural entitlement, and he freely admits that Judaism informed no aspect of his early personal history. “There were no Jews where I grew up,” he writes. “As a kid I thought they were the same as Christians only they went to church on Saturday. I married the first Jew I met” (NH, 137). Offutt’s best claim to Jewishness is through his wife and, then, their children. His blood linkage to Judaism is tenuous, indeed. Offutt is not an eye-witness to any of the events of the Holocaust, nor are any of his relatives. More disturbing, though, are Offutt’s conversations with Arthur, as recorded in the metanarrative. Arthur and Irene had originally tape-recorded their stories *only* as a means of sharing their history with their grandchildren. It was just after Offutt “hit on the idea of bringing these disparate narratives together” that he “called Arthur for permission to use the tapes” (NH, 62). Unlike *Maus*, where Vladek was complicit in his son’s publication of his Holocaust stories, Arthur appears less enthusiastic about

the project. He neither gives nor denies permission for Offutt to use the tapes, but “there was a long silence on the phone, until [Arthur] said, “To write this book, Sonny, is like telling the lions not to eat the antelope” (NH, 62). The ambiguity of Arthur’s non-native lexicon contributes to the moral ambiguity of Offutt’s representation of these Holocaust stories: does Arthur mean that “to tell Offutt *not* to write this book would be like telling the lions not to eat the antelope?” In which case, Arthur’s “permission” is not so much a tacit agreement as resignation in the face of Offutt’s determination.

Several times, Arthur mentions that he “is not angry at the German army because he was a soldier and understands the mentality of serving one’s country. He feels most betrayed by his fellow Poles, especially members of the Jewish Police” (NH, 63). Later, he mentions the “oath of silence” taken by all who survived the death camps; not only is loyalty of utmost importance to Arthur, but he feels a strong sense of safety in the privatisation of his memories of the Holocaust. He reveals at the end of *No Heroes* that he has revealed “the highlights only” of his experiences, and expresses discomfort over what little he has recounted for posterity, via Offutt’s memoir (NH, 258). The conclusion of *No Heroes* gives no indication that Arthur is pleased with the project; throughout the book, too, his worry is apparent. He wonders about the details: “Did he get the English right? Does he come off like a whining victim?” (Offutt reassures Arthur that he has “cut out all his whining”) (NH, 198). Arthur tells Offutt that one night, he “could not sleep. It disturbed me that my thoughts are on paper. I don’t want to say nothing nasty about you, Sonny, but do you understand what I tell you? Maybe I don’t use the right words. It makes me feel scared, a strange feeling. I hope you have written my heart” (NH, 199). Does Arthur continue with the project out of a sense of loyalty to his son-in-law, even though he is not comfortable with the idea of his memories being exposed so publicly?

The most disturbing example of Arthur's discomfort comes towards the beginning of the narrative; he "says that he wears a nightshirt to sleep in. It is not so long, the nightshirt, and sometimes he has to pull it down to cover his uh-ohs. The book makes him feel like the nightshirt is rolled up" (NH, 79). Whereas Emily Budick's harsh criticism of Spiegelman's *Maus* seemed too extreme for the circumstance she discusses, here, her question would be more appropriate: "What, if anything, justifies [Offutt's] telling of his [father-in-law's] story, against his ... objection, his plea that he not be resubjected to one more version of that humiliation of exposure that he was made to suffer during the Holocaust?" (220). What justifies Offutt's publication of Arthur and Irene's stories, knowing they make an eighty-year-old man feel as though his most private parts are on display for the world to see?

Posed in this manner, there seems to be no reasonable rationalisation of Offutt's appropriation of these Holocaust stories: Offutt appears callous and self-serving. However, much as it provides evidence of Offutt's insensitivity, *No Heroes* is also replete with indicators that he has, in fact, been responsible in his representation of Arthur and Irene's memories. After Arthur confesses to Offutt that the book makes him feel exposed, Offutt somewhat cavalierly responds, "that is the nature of art," but then redeems himself by asking if Arthur "wants me to roll his shirt back down. It's not too late" (NH, 79). Arthur refuses Offutt's offer, insisting only that the author not portray survivors as heroes, a sentiment reminiscent of Sally Grubman's claim that "the Holocaust was never a history of courage and resistance" (373).

Just as Dominick LaCapra notes that Art Spiegelman "becomes a Jew or assumes a Jewish identity ... through his concern with the Holocaust" (177), Offutt would no doubt claim sympathy for and identification with the Jewish faith, simply as a result of his extensive conversations with Arthur and Irene. Psychiatrist Dori Laub contends that "the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner



of the traumatic event,” and that “the listener ... experiences a need ... to withdraw into a safer place, a place where he can in turn protect himself” (57, 73). The listener -- in this case, Offutt -- adopts the distress of the primary witness (Arthur or Irene); as the listener becomes involved in the story of the trauma, he takes advantage of his ability to distance himself from what Stephen Spender calls “the destructive element.” He claims that “the conditions in which it is possible for writers to do their work ... nearly always preclude their entering by their own experiences into the centers of ‘the destructive element.’ Most writers gaze at the furnace through a fire-proofed window in a thick wall” (34). In accordance with these ideas, then, Offutt tells the stories of Arthur and Irene not *in spite of* their protestations, but *because* he has the advantage of emotional distance from the trauma they have endured.

The manner in which Offutt presents these stories also helps to justify his appropriation of their content. When authors “appropriate” the intellectual property of another culture, they often do so in a manner that tries to capture the voice of the original culture. For example, W.P. Kinsella’s *Hobbema* series of short stories about Native Canadians, wherein there is a first-person narrative; the reader is led into an intimate realm where the “I” is supposed to have experienced the novel’s contents -- though that is impossible. *No Heroes*, however, is non-fiction: Offutt has not heard the stories of Arthur and Irene, and then converted them into a fiction wherein Arthur would become the “I” figure. Instead -- vitally -- Arthur and Irene’s voices are definitively their own; Offutt does not insinuate himself into their narratives, but rather, allows their stories to exist independently alongside his own. The reader is not deceived into thinking that Offutt has in any way experienced what Arthur and Irene have, and understands that they retain ownership of their memories.

It must also be noted that the term, “cultural appropriation,” is usually applied in instances where a member of the dominant culture borrows the heritage of a minority culture, for either mercenary or egotistical reasons. Though Offutt is a

white, American man (and as such is part of the dominant American culture), he identifies himself primarily as an Appalachian, part of America's doubly Othered culture. Should we make allowances for Offutt's minority status, in reference to his representation of the Holocaust? Would it be cultural appropriation if an African American woman wrote about the Holocaust -- or if a Jewish American man wrote a text on southern slaves? Western culture -- that is, modern liberal-democratic society -- tends to excuse minorities from the rigid structures that govern political awareness and political correctness -- and perhaps rightly so. After all, the essence of the argument against cultural appropriation emanates from the notion that members of the dominant culture have not suffered and struggled, and therefore are not entitled to reap any possible rewards for the representation of suffering and struggle. Critics of cultural appropriation are merely critics of deceit, opposed to the idea that someone could be rewarded (financially or through popular acclaim) for *imagining* the plight of a minority culture. While Offutt's motives in including Arthur and Irene's narratives in the midst of his own memoir may be less than stellar, he is never deceitful. He does not represent the memories of his parents-in-law as his own, does not subvert their voices or assume entitlement to their cultural history. *No Heroes* is therefore *not* an example of cultural appropriation; and Offutt cannot be accused of stealing intellectual property. He is, at worst, guilty of an overly ambitious goal, of trying to enact a cross-cultural exchange that has become taboo in late twentieth-century America. Interestingly, similar ideas of cultural appropriation have been applied to southern literature -- or criticism of southern literature -- where its author is not southern. The usual thrust of arguments detailing "cultural theft," however, has been effectively parried by the wise words of Eugene Genovese, whose own non-native status has been questioned by southerners: "If one must be born in the South to participate meaningfully in its dialogue, then there is in fact only a monologue" (xviii).

Instead of an example of appropriation, then, *No Heroes* becomes emblematic of the very best that we can hope for the future of southern letters. In presenting the history of his parents-in-law alongside his own contemplations of home, legacy, and history, Offutt constructs a dialogue that questions the nature of southern literature. The future of this genre, in order that it may survive into a new context as a new fact, must acknowledge the expansion of its identity and the possibilities that that expansion can offer. The period for southern writers' abject fealty to all things southern -- to the exclusion of all that is *not* southern -- is now past. Contemporary authors reflect a literary heritage and a regional identity that can be equally proud of its traditions and of its ability to endure and to adapt. *No Heroes* heralds a new day for this genre, one in which its literature can reflect the burgeoning relationships between southerners and non-southerners, and among all those southerners previously separated by antiquated conceptualisations of how the South was meant to be.

## Conclusion

### Shifting Horizons of Expectation: The Future of Southern Writing

Matthew Guinn claims that “the best way to read today’s most innovative southern fiction is by seeking not continuity but discontinuity” (xi), while Richard Gray notes that “if there is change within continuity, then there is also continuity within change” (1996: 221). Both Guinn and Gray offer appropriate methods of interpreting Chris Offutt’s recent work -- to seek discontinuity is to discover ways in which Offutt has departed from the comfort of Appalachia and begun to explore various and new areas of his imagination. However, the reader determined to find continuity within Offutt’s new writing will be equally satisfied, as he uses what is already familiar to give his recent work stability.

Since 2002, and the publication of *No Heroes*, Offutt has produced three significant pieces of work that contribute to a revision of what “southern” can mean: two short stories, “Decirculating the Monkey,” which appeared in *Surreal South* (2007), and “A Good Pine” (2006); as well as an autobiographical essay, “Porn Bought My Football,” printed in the nonfiction journal, *River Teeth*. “Decirculating the Monkey” is the second chapter of a forthcoming novel called *Hit Monkey*, and follows an ex-military thug as he attempts to kill the pet monkey of a gangster’s daughter. “A Good Pine,” which Offutt read on National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered* on Christmas Day, 2006, is one of a collection of short stories to be published as *Luck*, Offutt’s third such volume. This story presents a rural Appalachian grandfather’s attempt to slow the onslaught of the contemporary world on his small piece of history; his retrieval of a pine tree for his granddaughter’s school allegorises the encroachment of technological advancement into Appalachia.

“Porn Bought My Football” is the first honest account of Offutt’s childhood, as it was affected by the careers of his parents in the pornography industry.

The search for Gray’s “continuity within change” finds purchase in “A Good Pine”; this story most closely resembles those found in *Kentucky Straight*, as Offutt portrays regular people confronting the loss of their traditions. The grandfather wonders “if the little knowledge he possessed was worth imparting to a child entering a world so foreign to his own[:] where to seek the hidden bounty of the woods, which timber was best for kindling, how to fashion a gourd into a dipper” (3). His uncertainty echoes the concern of Tar Cutler (of “Old of the Moon,” in *Kentucky Straight*), whose children have all left Kentucky; Tar’s folkloric knowledge has been reduced to micro-cassette recordings, while the grandfather in “A Good Pine” tries to negotiate a difficult space between preparing his granddaughter for the new world and instilling within her traditional knowledge.<sup>91</sup> After he manages to remove the pine tree from the ground, the grandfather thinks that “for nine years, he had watched that pine tree grow ... never giving any thought to its outcome -- shining briefly in a classroom corner before getting cast in the creek, brown needles swept by swift water, silver strands of fake icicle clinging to the limbs” (5). The nine years of the tree’s life parallel the constant existence of Appalachia, whose culture has persisted without considering a possible demise; now, the history of this place and these people is being flooded by “the mushrooming of satellite dishes” and the exodus of young Appalachians (1). Like Virgil Caudill’s backyard, the stability of the grandfather’s environment is slowly eroding. “A Good Pine” thus revisits many of the same issues that Offutt introduced in his first volume of short stories, indicating

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<sup>91</sup> The list of the grandfather’s knowledge also recalls that of the father in “Blue Lick,” who tells his sons: “Shoot to kill ... never wound. Fold a three-flush after five. Don’t give women gifts. Always throw the first punch” (KS, 122). Such instructions will also remind the reader of the advice imparted to Bone by her uncles, in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*: “You hold a knife like this ... You work a screwdriver from your shoulder, swing a hammer from your hip, and spread your fingers when you want to hold something safe” (22).

both the continued importance of maintaining an authentically Appalachian representation of this culture, as well as a lingering fear of its eventual expiration.

Within this sense of continuity, however, there is change. “A Good Pine” is one of a collection of short stories about a woman named Lucy Moore, each of which examines Lucy at various stages of her life. With the exception of “A Good Pine” and one or two other stories, though, *Luck* will use Lucy as its narrator, marking a distinct departure from Offutt’s previously male-focused writing. The freedom Offutt experienced in the writing of *No Heroes*, allowing other narratives to punctuate his own, becomes more pronounced in *Luck*, as Offutt uses the feminine voice to explore familiar issues from the perspective of the opposite gender.

Such freedom is also apparent in Offutt’s other short story, “Decirculating the Monkey.” Readers will recognise familiar markings of Offutt’s style (short, sparing sentences, and mentions of “home”), but the narrator of this story appears to be the alter-ego of Offutt’s previous characters. The narrator lives in urban Kentucky, has extensive military training and an encyclopaedic knowledge of weaponry, and is estranged from his only son. He makes his living performing thuggish duties for Max, a gangster who gained dominance through a “bloody clinching of street power” (199). The narrator of “Decirculating the Monkey” hardly resembles the characters who populate Offutt’s earlier work -- generally pensive men enmeshed in the confines of a rural environment, reluctant to engage in violence. The methodical ability to plot a crime, however, recalls Virgil Caudill’s preparations for the murder of Billy Rodale, though this narrator’s target proves more difficult to slay. The narrator’s encounter with the monkey indicates a complete departure from Offutt’s usual emphasis on realism. Whereas the author’s previous work has been distinctive for its attention to the plight of average people, “Decirculating the Monkey” is an exercise in surrealism. Here, the reader must engage with the image of a militaristic primate, a monkey who is capable of disarming a professional hitman,

communicating with humans through acknowledged hand signals, and convincing his would-be assassin to chauffeur him to his freedom. Offutt notes that the monkey is possessed of an “overriding despair -- not so much the hopeless variety, but a tragic optimism as if he perceived existence on its own terms -- boring, short, and full of pain.” This, certainly, is “not a normal monkey” (208).

If, as Matthew Guinn suggests, we must look for discontinuity in the best of contemporary southern fiction, then Offutt’s portrait of this unusual simian indicates a recent commitment to taking “the big chance” that Fred Hobson desires in future southern literature. Offutt’s previous “big chances” came cloaked in the safety of the familiar: he posited some characters in the West (though all remained devoted to Appalachia); he expanded the parameters of southern autobiography (though retained enough of its integral features as to render it recognisably southern); and he ventured far beyond the borders of the South to tell the stories of Arthur and Irene (though he couched these tales within his own recollections of an Appalachian homecoming). “Decirculating the Monkey,” however, takes the big chance without benefit of a safety net. The author’s earlier compulsion to use his craft in order to make larger political statements -- or indeed, to simply speak for something beyond itself -- is missing from this recent story. Offutt has transposed his artistic concerns onto a new canvas, one that is devoid of any of his former themes. “Decirculating the Monkey” is set in Lexington, Kentucky, but it could as easily be Chicago or Portland; where once region functioned as a main character, it has now faded into the backdrop.

What are the implications of such a departure for the future of southern literature? Is literature that is written by southerners and set in the South, though its content not *about* the South, still southern? More precisely, is southern literature that does not tackle issues endemic to that region destined for exclusion from the canon? Southern literature has repeatedly survived predictions of its demise; each critical assertion that its death is imminent has been thwarted by a new publication that at

once affirms southern traditions and expands their boundaries. Offutt's abrogation of his allegiance to characteristically southern themes therefore does not signal the death of this region's literature -- but it may disqualify "Decirculating the Monkey" from southern classification. Offutt's daring conceptualisation in this new story, and the subsequent risk of its declassification, raises disturbing issues for the future of southern literature. Does Offutt's story about a guerrilla monkey -- doubtlessly, a "big chance" -- inherently suggest that it is impossible to take such chances *within* the confines of existing southern literature? Does taking the big chance necessarily situate the risk-taker outside the familiar, beyond the figurative South? To include work such as "Decirculating the Monkey" within southern literature surely necessitates a renegotiation of that literature's parameters, an expansion of the definition of "southern." Perhaps southern literature's most lasting tradition -- indeed, the most pervasive tradition of the South in general -- has been its ability to respond and adapt to threat (and remain southern).<sup>92</sup> Given this adaptability, there is every reason to assume that southern literature will expand to include stories like "Decirculating the Monkey" -- if only for the simple fact that it continues to exist as a recognisable, disparate entity, in spite of countless prophecies to the contrary.<sup>93</sup>

The recent essay, "Porn Bought My Football" (2006), is Offutt's first attempt to tell the real story of his family's history. This is not the story of his parents-in-law, nor a recollection of his youthful wanderings, nor a contrivance for his sons' legacy. Finally, Offutt removes the curtain of disguise, and confirms his readers' suspicions about his unwillingness to write openly of his childhood. The reader will recall the author's difficult relationship with his father from *The Same River Twice* and *No Heroes*, but "Porn Bought My Football" reveals that Offutt was embarrassed by his

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<sup>92</sup> See again Fredrik Barth's contemplation of "groupness" and its reliance upon persistent boundaries.

<sup>93</sup> Though "Decirculating the Monkey" is reminiscent of the southern Gothic (wherein the author uses supernatural or unusual events to guide the plot and explore social and cultural issues of the South), it still represents a departure from the traditional parameters of this genre as well as a departure from Offutt's previous work.



father's profession (as a writer of hard-core pornography), and compelled to keep it a secret. *The Same River Twice* remains of course Offutt's bid to create a new heritage for his children, but this essay helps explain both why the author chose not to write about his own childhood, and why he was motivated to erase that component. In a 1998 interview, when asked if his family was troubled by the autobiographical nature of his work, Offutt merely said, "Fuck 'em. Let 'em write their own book" (Reeves, "Back to the Woods"). And yet, Offutt's first five books are as much an exercise in concealment as they are an invitation into the writer's psyche.<sup>94</sup> Offutt may have expressed a lack of concern for his family's privacy in 1998, but he did, in fact, keep the family's secrets hidden until the publication of "Porn Bought My Football," in 2006.<sup>95</sup> I do not think that this essay can, like "A Good Pine" or "Decirculating the Monkey," provide clues as to the future of Offutt's work or southern literature in general. Instead, it indicates a different sort of freedom; for whatever reason, Offutt no longer feels beholden to the family secrets. Perhaps by the end of 1998, after his return to Kentucky (as chronicled in *No Heroes*), Offutt finally realised that his relationship with his father was irreparable, and that his allegiance (as evidenced by his lengthy silence about his father's occupation and his character) was no longer necessary -- or even beneficial. Perhaps the writing of *Kentucky Straight*, *The Same River Twice*, *The Good Brother*, *Out of the Woods*, and *No Heroes* provided catharsis for Offutt, an emotional distance that finally allowed him to be free of his father's influence. Or, perhaps Offutt finally realised that a true legacy for his sons, a faithful rendering of his history, must include the turmoil of a childhood enveloped in shame and secrecy.

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<sup>94</sup> Just as cultures are equally bound by their collective memory and what they have selected to forget (*pace* Ernest Renan), Offutt's work is demarcated both by his recollections and the information he has chosen to leave out.

<sup>95</sup> Talleyrand once said that "la parole a été donnée à l'homme pour déguiser sa pensée" (language has been given to man so that he can disguise his thoughts). Offutt has used language to reveal certain thoughts while concealing others.

Unlike “A Good Pine” or “Decirculating the Monkey,” Offutt includes no note with “Porn Bought My Football” to indicate that it is part of a larger, forthcoming collection. Certainly, an extended version of this essay would make for a fascinating memoir, and provide a chance for Offutt to tell the story of his childhood. It is not, however, necessary: “Porn Bought My Football” marks the end of long journey for Offutt, wherein he travelled away from his home, his family, and his self, in search of the ability to confront his past and reshape it into a proud future. In her Pulitzer Prize-nominated memoir, *Clear Springs*, fellow Kentuckian Bobbie Ann Mason writes that she has “been free to roam, because [I’ve] always known where home is” (13). “Porn Bought My Football” might be Offutt’s final acceptance of “home” -- flawed though it may be -- and stories like “Decirculating the Monkey” indicate his newfound ability to shift the horizons of contemporary southern writing.

## Appendix I<sup>96</sup>

### Names and Naming in *The Good Brother*: Erasing History

Virgil Caudill's very name -- and the process of naming within *The Good Brother* -- is a vital component of the larger framework of a patriarchal system. His forename, 'Virgil,' brings to consciousness a pair of disparate theses: one that is concerned with the notion of virginity, or inexperience, and another that suggests a philosophic, contemplative mind -- both attentive to detail and all-too-aware of the consequences that follow actions. "Caudill" firmly situates the character within Kentucky lore, as Caudill is a common Melungeon name. This band of primitive souls, once castigated as too violent and unruly even for the already-wild Appalachian culture, is now being reinvestigated and reinterpreted with the contemporary interest in establishing pioneering bloodlines. In the second half of *The Good Brother*, Virgil Caudill digs a symbolic grave for his former self, and erects a grave marker etched with the initials "V.C." The generally misguided band of patriots, the Bills, wrongfully interpret these initials as standing for "Viet Cong" -- and infer a militaristic association, causing heightened suspicion aimed at Virgil, and eventually leading him to his new life. Incorrect though the Bills may have been, Offutt's inclusion of this error indicates that the process of naming within the novel can both provide clues as to a person's identity, and equally, conjure a fictive persona.

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<sup>96</sup> Though it may seem as though this discussion of naming within *The Good Brother* (and, subsequently, the following essay on male camaraderie in the second Appendix) are superfluous to the main text -- and therefore unnecessary -- I feel as though they provide a more detailed explication of Offutt's particular attention to style and detail. Throughout his work, Offutt names his characters carefully, but it is in *The Good Brother*, particularly, that this process warrants more careful consideration. Similarly, interactions among men form a vital part of Offutt's work; in many ways, his attitude towards men and masculinity underpin nearly every other aspect of his writing. However, neither of these two sections fit appropriately into any one of the main chapters; hence, the appendices. I hope that these sections provide clarity and insight into two of Offutt's more subtle considerations.

The name “Virgil Caudill” is thus an amalgam of two dichotomous ideas, and presents the character Virgil Caudill as the embodiment of a contemporary Appalachian man’s personal conflict with the traditions of his home region. Virgil Caudill is both non-traditional (contemplative, gentle, naïve) and part of a masculine tradition that eclipses him or his present situation.

In deciding to assume a new name (for the sake of anonymity) in the West, Virgil Caudill simultaneously -- and irrevocably -- destroys his patriarchal legacy. His father and his brother are dead, his sister has adopted another man’s name, and so whatever children Virgil produces will not bear the family surname. By going West and adopting another persona and a different name, Virgil is abandoning his own masculine roots. Like Offutt’s own rebirth (at the age of nineteen, upon leaving Kentucky), Virgil Caudill is reborn through his desertion of his cultural traditions. Both characters -- for Offutt must be viewed as fictive in his own memoirs -- are consciously shedding the rituals and the traditions of their southern upbringing, one that has centred so strongly upon an incontrovertible masculinity.

Offutt employs Biblical phrasing to introduce Virgil Caudill’s new, carefully selected identity: “On the third day Joe Tiller rose” (GB, 126). Indeed, Joe Tiller is merely rising from his bed, and not from the dead, but the effect remains powerfully rejuvenating. ‘Joe Tiller’ has been conceived immaculately; his sudden appearance is akin to a virgin birth, in terms of a genealogy recognisable to the American government. Joe Tiller’s introduction then, on the “third day,” is not merely the introduction of a character, but of an argument. In conjunction with the manner in which he appears in his new environment, the name ‘Joe Tiller’ seems, like ‘Virgil Caudill,’ a label with ideological overtones. ‘Joe’ is the ultimate Every Man name, an emblem of ordinariness in contemporary America. For a man trying to fit into society, trying to go unnoticed, he could choose no better name than ‘Average Joe,’ and ‘average’ is just what Virgil/Joe wants to be: a figure with no background, no

history, no outstanding features. The new surname, 'Tiller,' has agricultural implications -- as in, Joe is tilling the land, breaking through to a new, personal frontier. His name reflects his desire for anonymity and his behaviour supports that desire. As much as 'Virgil Caudill' is a specific emanation from a steadfast tradition, 'Joe Tiller' is an empty vessel, representative of any and Every Man in America: he is ready to assume whatever identity this new land thrusts upon him.<sup>97</sup>

Further, the alliterative elements in the names "Boyd" and "Botree" and a consciousness of fundamental aspect of naming within the novel invite deeper comparisons between the two characters. There is a "Bo" in each half of *The Good Brother*, and each time this figure serves a catalyst for Virgil's (or Joe's) undertakings. Both Boyd and Botree lead Virgil/Joe, a feat facilitated by Virgil's/Joe's focused devotion to each person. Boyd led Virgil since childhood, his bravery and adventurousness displacing unwanted focus away from Virgil. In Montana, Botree leads Joe in his decision to remain in the West and in her community, simply because he has fallen in love with her and her pre-packaged family. Botree's power over Joe rests in her role as the symbol of all the possibilities that he has abandoned in Appalachia, and misses. Through Botree, Joe transposes his unconscious aspirations from Kentucky to Montana; Botree's presence nourishes Joe's memories of his life in Appalachia. Like Boyd, Botree is psychologically uncoordinated; they each present a version of themselves that is appropriate to their current audience. At home, Botree is a devoted mother, committed to raising her children intelligently and independently. But with the Bills, or when discussing her allegiance to the Bills, Botree's familiarity with weapons is clear, as is her flagrant racism and prejudice towards Native Americans. Such duality is distinctly reminiscent of Boyd's ability to present a self to his family that bore no resemblance

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<sup>97</sup> Virgil Caudill's assumption of the name, 'Joe Tiller,' is not merely a re-working of his adult character. It is also the rebirth -- literally, a second chance at life -- for the long-deceased child that was originally given the name, 'Joe Tiller.' Virgil decided to use the name 'Joe Tiller' after he spotted that child's headstone in a local graveyard, thinking it would be easier to recreate an identity for someone who had existed -- if only briefly -- rather than try to conjure an entirely fictive persona.

to that which he displayed to the wider community. Boyd had “out-wilded” all those men who had tried to befriend him; Botree had once been a stripper -- “the kind of wild a woman can get” (GB, 243).

Boyd and Botree are thus linked by both their names and their characteristics; as much as Virgil Caudill tries to erase his history by taking “Joe Tiller” as his new name, Botree’s replacement of Boyd in his new world indicates that such an erasure is never as easy as it may seem.

## Appendix II

### Men and Cars in Offutt's Work

Chris Offutt's ongoing struggle to classify his gendered identity was paid much attention in his first memoir, *The Same River Twice*; by the publication of *No Heroes*, the author had given up on his childhood ideal of belonging to a corps of society-recognised hyper-masculine men. He will never belong to the peace corps or the Army Rangers; instead, in his second memoir, he focuses his subconscious attention on the minutiae that symbolise southern masculinity. The chapters in *No Heroes* that are not devoted to Arthur and Irene broach one of three general subjects: nature and the woods, his attempt at bringing literature into the hills, and his encounters with the people from his past -- all of whom hold significance in the author's memories. Some of these characters were his former teachers or coaches; he credits Mrs. Jayne (his first-grade teacher, as noted in the dedication), in particular, with providing him with the most basic tools with which he carries out his craft. These encounters form the basis of Offutt's personal history; his past experiences with these important people and his reconnection with them later are the boundaries of his past. Offutt writes of his father's volatile nature in *The Same River Twice* and more recently, in his essay, "Porn Bought My Football." His childhood was spent in the woods, banished from his home so that his father could write in silence. The friends with whom he passed countless hours in exile -- the boys from Haldeman who referred to themselves as the "Haldemaniacs" -- are the men with whom he spends time when he returns to Kentucky as an adult. With this group of friends, he spent the "happiest" evenings, while his "sons mingled with their kids, throwing Frisbees and footballs and trying to sneak a drink of beer" (NH, 163). The

friendships of these men will be continued through their children, but in the chapter entitled “Brothers of the Hill,” Offutt reminisces about their past. These boys spent the majority of their formative years in the woods, learning from each other the behaviours that would come to identify them as southern men. Offutt introduces the twelve Haldemaniacs, and then proceeds to introduce their cars. Earlier, the author notes that “if you’re a man in eastern Kentucky, you can’t go around saying you love other men. We communicated through our cars, our fists, and the ancient go-between of women” (NH, 128-129); this notion of communication through cars is often visited in the author’s recantation of his experiences in coming home to eastern Kentucky. The author’s own “1968 Malibu – red with a black interior ... a shifter kit, short pipes, a 327-cubic-inch engine, three moonie hubcaps, and a double-pump carburetor ... could reach a hundred miles per hour in less than eight seconds” (NH, 40); this, he reveals with pride, is a *man*’s car. And yet, “my Malibu fit in but the boys were appalled that I didn’t know how to work on it” (NH, 163). The boys, of course, are these boys that Offutt grew up with; when they gather as adults to watch their children play together, they all “drank beer, setting the cans on the hood of my Malibu because I had the worst paint job” (NH, 163). A man’s position within the group is, to some degree, determined by his car. Offutt’s Malibu is all heart and little finesse -- a reflection of Offutt himself.

The history of the Haldemaniacs is intrinsically linked to their cars; their personalities, like Offutt’s, are reflected in their choice of vehicle. Faron (who “was a man of action”) “drove a yellow Nova that could run like a scalded dog.” Sonny (who “was learning the trade of plumbing from his father”) “owned a broke-down GTO that he kept beneath a tarp in an open shed up a hollow beside a creek.” Roy (who “had gone through the Gulf War and returned with a part of himself concealed”) “drove a 1966 Mustang, cherried out, restored until it gleamed in the sun” (NH, 163). Faron’s tendency towards action necessitated a car with speed -- or



was it that his speedy car indicated a preference for action in its owner? Sonny, still shamefully dependent on his father in his late thirties, kept his car -- his manhood -- under wraps. Roy's self may have been concealed by the Gulf War, but his masculinity (implied by his veteran status) is confirmed by his vintage muscle car that is always on parade. Each man chooses his car with the knowledge that it will speak for him, for his character; the car has become the symbol of masculinity in an environment where symbols now necessarily and practically function. Historical manhood negated the need for symbols; one's classification as a southern man (or, more particularly, a white southern man) ensured recognition of masculinity. The contemporary southern environment no longer sustains such presumptions, and so symbols now function as indicators of identity. No southern man, according to Offutt, is ignorant of the implications of his choice in automobile. His own Malibu emits signals to his friends, and ranks him in their midst according to its strengths and weaknesses (and, of course, the author's own). The author, who purchased his car in Montana and had it shipped home to Kentucky, is all-too-willing to draw comparisons between himself and his car: "Like me, the body was beat to pieces" (NH, 40). His language -- "like me" -- demonstrates clearly to the reader that Offutt understood the necessity of a car that spoke for him in his home state. Without the means of communication that the author had gotten used to elsewhere in the United States -- language, writing -- he must now revert back to the language of the South and he has chosen his "words" carefully. Sonny -- who already hides his own car -- "thought the car was wasted on [Offutt] and sought to buy it cheap;" Offutt's old friend obviously ranks the author lower even than himself on the masculinity rating scale. When Offutt says that his "Malibu fit in," he really means that *he* fit in.

The author finally utilises his Malibu as a means of accessing his imagined past. As Offutt speeds through his hometown, taking in the changing scenery, he contemplates his childhood in Morehead, and his teenage years. In high school, he

writes, “I didn’t own a car and the family rig was a yellow Volkswagen square back that was severely embarrassing” (NH, 98). Now, as an adult, Offutt cruises in the Malibu with “my left arm draped out the window in true country style” (NH, 96); Rita “sat beside [him] on the bench seat, exactly as [he’d] hoped a girl would sit twenty years ago” (NH, 102). The car, then, becomes the conveyance through which Offutt can imagine his past -- only a better, more memorable version of that past.

When the author finally decides to leave Kentucky, again, he has one more car than he needs. Without pretense, Offutt invites his old friend Faron to his house, and asks him for a dollar. Faron, without asking why, hands Chris the dollar and receives in turn “the title to the Malibu” (NH, 238). Faron’s lack of reaction to such a gift puzzles the author, but the reader understands the magnitude of such an offering. For these men, whose lives revolve so fully around their cars, the gift of another man’s pride and joy, his *identity* as a man, signals the pinnacle of a relationship between two men. Offutt did not just give Faron his car, he gave him his trust and his loyalty. Faron took the car home, and “sat in a lawn chair all day, looking at the Malibu. All he did was grin” (NH, 239).

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